



HANDS ON BARBED WIRE: STORIES OF IRAQI REFUGEES (1980-2003)

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By Hamid Atiyyah

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Introduction

Iraqis are a proud and patriotic people. Many of them speak of it as Iraq al-Azeem or great Iraq. Their literature and art glorify its scenic northern mountains, great rivers, elegant date palms, bountiful fields and generous people. They never tire of reminding others that ancient Iraq or Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilization which gave humanity agriculture, writing, the wheel, government and laws among other things. Their pride in the grandeur of its golden past is matched only by their confidence in their ability to build an equally impressive future for them in it. In addition to recounting former achievements and glories, their history also reminds them of past failings and amplifies in comparison present shortcomings and disappointments. It is difficult for any literate Iraqi to ignore the sharp contrast between the golden past and the bleak present.

After boasting that Baghdad was once the capital of the great Muslim-Arab Empire and the leading center of knowledge and scholarship in the world, most Iraqis would sadly admit that since its fall at the hands of the Mongol hordes more than ten centuries ago that glory has not been replicated. During that lost golden age of Baghdad, thinkers were not afraid to speak their minds and write on controversial philosophical issues, and religious scholars from rival sects boldly propounded their views in schools and mosques. Under the Ba'th regime (1968-2003), even this limited measure of intellectual freedom enjoyed by their ancestors was denied to Iraqis whose creativity was further constrained by ethnic divisions and religious and sectarian intolerance. The population of Iraq at the times of Haroun al-Rasheed, the Abbasid caliph of Arabian Nights' fame, was estimated at forty million but a population of half this number in modern times found it difficult to maintain a subsistence living during periods of political instability and years of wars and their aftermath. Its blessings in wealth and geopolitical importance became a curse attracting foreign invaders and opportunists who looted and wasted its resources and oppressed its population.

Despite the marauders, invaders, frequent plagues and annual floods, Iraqis have generally preferred to remain in their country and endure the hardships. Having a Bedouin origin certainly qualifies them to be geographically mobile. Other Arabs such as their Syrian

neighbors were prominently represented in the massive immigration movements to the New World during the last two centuries. Several reasons may be behind the Iraqis' aversion to immigration: the wealth of their country, its national and religious significance and, even more importantly, their conviction that misfortune whether in the form of a tyrant, a flood or a plague is transient. This was true until the Ba'th regime came to power in 1968, and especially after it embarked on its reckless military campaigns against Iran first and then its southern Arab neighbors. Since then Iraqis have been leaving their country, temporarily or permanently, in droves. This book presents the stories of some of these refugees and exiles.

There are several reasons that support writing a book on Iraqi refugees. To begin with, their number is thought to be in the millions. Conservative estimates put the figure in excess of two millions while some believe it is close to four millions. Political oppression or financial need forced most of these Iraqis to leave their country. Unless the political and economic situation inside Iraq drastically improves, this trend is expected to continue and may possibly intensify. The list of countries currently hosting these Iraqis is long and includes Western developed countries, countries bordering Iraq and almost any other country willing to admit them. The governments of these countries and their refugee agencies certainly need information on the attitudes and expectations of these exiles in order to build effective channels of communications with them and to meet their legitimate needs. These Iraqis, like all refugees and displaced persons living in foreign countries, must also adapt to the systems, values and customs of host countries. Acculturation problems faced by them may be complex and difficult and need to be identified, analyzed and solved. Another reason for writing this book is that significant numbers of Iraqis in exile are actively involved in political groups and activities and are expected to somehow impact the political future of Iraq. These Iraqis, their associations and activities have naturally attracted the attention of governments concerned with political developments within Iraq and the Middle East.

Exiled Iraqis whose stories are told here also saw a genuine need for a book on them. Many of them felt that their points of view were not given due consideration by host countries and international agencies. They were worried that sooner or later international sympathy for their causes and sufferings would diminish unless these are kept in focus. Accordingly, some of them saw in this book a forum for airing their

opinions and grievances on the political, economic and social aspects of their lives in exile. Some of them also wanted to register their dissatisfaction with relations and associations among refugees. They were convinced that these relations were soured or strained by polarization of views, misunderstandings and mistrust resulting from insufficient communication and rivalries. A number of them were eager to share with the author information about what they considered to be improper objectives and unorthodox methods of operation of some groups and individuals within their communities. The motivation behind this cooperation was clearly to expose these groups and to hopefully put an end to their exploitation of the refugees' causes and needs.

This book does not aim to address all these issues. It is limited in scope to topics raised by Iraqi refugees in their stories about their lives outside their home country. It must also be noted that the stories presented in this book are not representative of the total experiences of Iraqi refugees and exiles. The number of persons from whom these stories were obtained was small and totaled less than a hundred. Also, the research was conducted mainly in two locations: Syria and Canada. Additional material was also collected in Jordan and England. Convenience rather than methodological rigor dictated the choice of these locations and the material obtained. Damascus in Syria presented one of the most propitious places for collecting these stories. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Syria hosted the second largest number of displaced Iraqis after Iran. Many of the Iraqis who lived in other countries also visited Syria for religious or other purposes. Most of them had stories to tell about the hardships of living outside their country of origin and were eager to share these stories with the author. Pseudonyms were used in these stories to protect the identities of my informants

Another methodological limitation on this book stems from the anecdotal nature of the material used in it. Like all anecdotal evidence, its authenticity cannot be totally verified although every effort was made to exclude biased material such as gossip and innuendo. Given these limitations no claim can be made as to the generalization of results obtained here. The only conclusion, which can be made with high certainty, is the need for further and more rigorous research on these exiles.

Many of the stories included in this book have personal, social, economic, religious and political dimensions to them. The story of Omran told in the first chapter of this book is a good example of this. A

whole chapter was dedicated to it because in my opinion it reflected in a dramatic and striking fashion the plight of these refugees and exiles. Most of the other stories were also complex and multi-faceted but reporting them in their full versions would not have accorded with the framework of this book. The eight main chapters of this book and the stories presented in them deal with the following major topics about refugees: a refugee drama, camps, finding a country of refuge, human smuggling, financial concerns, problems of adaptations and acculturation, religious issues, violence, and political activities. Each of these chapters is divided into a short introduction and a number of relevant topics, which are presented and illustrated through short stories, anecdotes, analyses and comments supplied by refugees. The conclusions include a summary of general findings and recommendations for action.

Chapter One: A Fate Worse Than Death, Omran's Story

It was late morning when the burial procession streamed out of the *husaynia*, led by the pallbearers carrying the heavy coffin on their shoulders and headed east in the direction of the cemetery. The all-male mourners walked slowly, breaking rank frequently to avoid the puddles, stacks of bricks and bags of cement overflowing from building sites on both sides of the narrow street. The unprecedented building boom in Al-Saida began after the mass infusion of Iraqis in the early 1980s. Before that, this was a small village nestled in the eastern part of the Ghota, the famed rich orchards surrounding Damascus, the Syrian capital, on three sides.

Iraqis came to this town, first in trickles and then in droves. They came to stay, not permanently as they assured each other and themselves but until it was safe for them to go back to their country. At their heels, the devout Iranians arrived on regular tours organized by their government. They came to visit the holy sites and brought with them lucrative trade and more demand for services. These demographic and economic developments transformed the neglected, rural village into a sprawling town within few years.

The mourners that day were moved by different reasons to leave the comfort of their homes or the simple pleasures of a stroll in the bazaar or of a meeting with friends in a café and brave the elements to take part in the funeral procession. For some of them, it was a religious duty. The fervor of these pious individuals was unmistakably evident as they walked closely behind the coffin, jostled pallbearers to take their places and frequently shouted *la ilah ila Allah* calling upon fellow mourners to remember their one Creator. It is also the custom among tribal and city people alike to attend funerals of relatives, friends, neighbors and colleagues. A large funeral procession is regarded as a proof of the good name, social status and prestige of the deceased, his family and tribe. People take note of persons who attend the funerals of their family members so that they can return the favor in kind someday. The political activists were also present that day to show their faces and gain credit for themselves and their groups. There was also the usual sprinkle of morbid, curious onlookers who came to watch and listen, hoping to go back with an interesting story or a piece

of gossip to their bored wives and café mates. A few Gypsies and needy local people showed up in the hope of receiving alms or securing a place in the post-funeral meal.

The procession reached the main street and waited for the traffic to stop before crossing to the cemetery on the other side. They call it the new cemetery to distinguish it from the old one, which filled up soon after the arrival of Iraqi refugees. There were less than a dozen graves in it. You can tell by the dates of burial inscribed on the headstones that they were all quite recent. One of my relatives attending the funeral told me earlier that Iraqis had already bought most of the plots in the new cemetery. He was a young man and, unlike many refugees including me, did not have to think about his funeral arrangement yet. An unusual sight in a Shia cemetery distracted my mind from thoughts of my impending mortality. Someone had brought flowers to the cemetery. Black is by custom the only acceptable color in this place. A colorful shirt, suit or tie worn by a mourner is frowned upon, and any shade of red is regarded as outright disrespectful. Wearing a red garment to a funeral is virtually an expression of contempt for the deceased and his family. Only an enemy intent on prolonging his feud with the deceased's family would do such an insolent thing. Someone was breaking with traditions. Surely, the bouquet laid across one of the fresh graves belonged in a wedding party and not in a cemetery. Under the brief words of sympathy written on the ribbon there was the name of a major dissident group. Someone should tell them that this gesture contradicted long-established traditions; they should have sent a wreath instead of a bouquet.

The colorful bouquet was not the only thing out of the ordinary in the cemetery that morning. The casket in which the deceased was transported all the way from London was also unconventional by local standards. It looked heavy and expensive. Some of the mourners were probably wondering about the price of such a casket, the like of which was never seen around here except in a scene of a church or a funeral parlor on television or in a movie. Someone behind me speculated that the price of such a fine casket would support a large family for a whole year in this town.

Iraqis talk much about death and worry about where they would be buried, how large their funeral would be and whether their loved ones would miss them. It is common for a Shia to prepare for his death well in advance by choosing a burial plot, preparing his grave and even buying his shroud. Old people travelling on long journeys used to pack

their shrouds with their luggage. Some claim that this morbidity is a characteristic Iraqi idiosyncrasy along with their deep melancholy and fiery temper. The themes of martyrdom and death are clearly prominent in the cultural and religious heritage of the Shia. But at least Iraqi refugees in this town did not have to worry about the cost of a casket because here it is provided freely by local husaynias. And since the dead is interred only in a shroud, one or two coffins were enough to serve the whole community.

The casket was lowered to the ground and mourners gathered around the open grave to witness the final rites of burial. Few minutes passed but the casket was still unopened. The men squatting around it were arguing among themselves on how to open the bolts securing the top while those standing above them were shouting down instructions and impatiently stroking their worry beads. They finally managed to have it opened and the body was taken out and lowered into the grave. All the faces looked sad and ashen and at that moment, a distant relative of the deceased covered his face with both hands and his body shook with loud sobs.

Fifteen minutes later it was over. We stood in line near the exit to receive the condolences of the mourners. We shook hands and exchanged the usual traditional phrases. In the evening, a *tazia* or post-funeral service was held in a local husaynia. The *tazia* is an established tradition that no self-respecting Shia dares to break, even if its expenses bankrupt him and his family. In Iraq, many people are forced to borrow from relatives and friends to pay for the cost of the *tazia* for a departed relative. Money was not a problem for this deceased's family because he died a rich man and left them a fortune. Of course, there is always something, which money could not buy, and in this case, it was burying him in his chosen final resting-place.

The deceased knew that he was dying of terminal cancer and it was his last wish that his body be interned in the city of al-Najaf al-Ashraf. Al-Ashraf literally means the most honored. It became known as such after Imam Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and the first Imam of the twelve Imams of the Imamia sect of Shias, was buried in it. All Shias wish to be buried in the grand cemetery not far from the shrine. It is still one of the largest, if not the largest, cemetery in the world – even after the Ba'th regime demolished countless graves in it to open new roads as it claimed or to desecrate the place as many of the Shias insist. Al-Najaf's cemetery obviously has strong religious and symbolic significance for all Shias including Iraqi refugees and exiles. Burial in

an unmarked grave or outside a proper cemetery is unacceptable to these people. In southern Iraq where tribal customs are still predominant, only adulterous women and illegitimate infants are buried in unmarked graves. In the past and before the introduction of fast means of transportation, the remains of affluent Shias from as far as India and Iran were preserved and then carried on horse or camel back to al-Najaf. Airplanes and cars made this trip easier for the deceased's relatives accompanying his remains but recently a thornier obstacle emerged. The Ba'th government in Iraq has persistently refused to allow the burial of remains of dissidents in Iraqi soil.

Many Iraqi exiles are unable to accept the idea of a burial outside their country. They dream of waking up one day to find that the regime in Iraq, which oppressed them and forced them out of their country, has been overthrown. What is worse than death, for many of them, is to die and be buried outside Iraq because for them it symbolizes their final defeat and the end of all hopes for them. Moreover, on Judgment Day when all the dead would be resurrected, they want to be among family members, friends and familiar faces.

The family of my deceased relative tried repeatedly and used all its influence to obtain permission for a burial in al-Najaf but the Iraqi authorities adamantly refused. He was very disappointed by this, but then someone suggested temporary internment. Shortly before his death, he instructed his family to bury him in a temporary grave until circumstances allowed reburial in Iraq. He died confident that one day his remains would be finally put to rest in the hallowed ground of al-Najaf near the graves of his parents and other members of his large family. However, it turned out that this was unfeasible because it contradicted religious tenets. The religious scholars consulted on this matter ruled that temporary internment is permissible only if overpowering circumstances rendered a proper burial impossible or life threatening. An example of this would be the burial of a soldier killed in battlefield. In this case, his body could be temporarily interred in the battleground until the war ended or a truce was declared allowing the transfer of his remains to a permanent grave in a common graveyard. Otherwise digging up the corpse would constitute a desecration and this is strictly forbidden. It was thus finally decided that the grave of the deceased in the new Shias' cemetery located in the small town of al-Saida Zainab was to be his final resting-place.

Burial in the cemetery of al-Saida Zainab is the second best choice for Iraqi exiles and refugees. The town has become strongly

associated with Iraqis in Syria. Most Iraqis who settled in this country chose to live in it. It resembled many rural towns in southern Iraq from which the vast majority of these Iraqis originally came and of which they held fond memories. However, it was probably the religious factor more than nostalgia that attracted these Iraqis to this town. The city derives its religious importance from the shrine of al-Saida Zainab. It is the consensus among Shia historians that the tomb of Zainab, Imam's Ali daughter and granddaughter of Prophet Mohammed, is located inside the shrine. When I first visited the town in the 1960s, it was a small village made up of one narrow street with two short strings of houses and shops on both sides. The shrine was a modest structure whose maintenance was undertaken by a wealthy pious Iraqi. I also remember accompanying my parents on a visit to the shrine after they performed pilgrimage to Mecca. The arrival of Iraqi refugees and the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iran changed the lives of the town's small population dramatically. Iraqi exiles flocked to al-Saida, as the town is commonly known, leasing or buying houses and apartments. New schools, husaynias, hospitals and clinics were built to serve the burgeoning population of immigrants and pilgrims. Scores of shops, restaurants and cafes catered to their needs and tastes. But what these newcomers proudly consider to be the most impressive achievement in recent years is the new mosque housing the shrine with its gilded dome, elegant minarets and spacious courtyards.

Bad tidings from Norway

Sadoon wanted to bury his daughter in al-Najaf but was probably willing to accept al-Saida's cemetery as a second choice. They made inquiries on his behalf and came back to tell him that the airfare would exceed ten thousand dollars. Sadoon was a poor farmer from southern Iraq and he could not possibly raise this large sum of money even if he sold all his meager possessions. A group of Iraqi refugees organized a donation campaign. Many generously donated from their welfare pay cheques or hard-earned wages. But when all the donations were counted, the total sum fell short of the required amount. Reluctantly he agreed to bury her in Norway.

Sadoon never contemplated travelling to the far and foreign land of Norway until he learned of the dreadful news. Like many devout Moslem Shias, he dreamt of going on a pilgrimage to Holy Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Saudi Arabia and of visiting the shrine of

Imam al-Ridha in Iran. Then his country waged its war on Iran and the dreams of many old and young Iraqis were painfully shattered or indefinitely postponed.

Sadoon did not approve of his daughter's going to Norway. Tribal customs dictate that a person's proper abode should be with his family and tribe. In the old days, only criminals disowned by their families and tribes were forced to leave the tribal *dira* or homeland. But many old customs were no longer kept and scores of young men were leaving their families to study or work in the cities. During the early years of the Iraq-Iran war, the economic boom resulting from heavy investment in infrastructure projects in the capital Baghdad created numerous work opportunities for men who had not yet been called up for military service. The Iraq-Iran war left its sad marks on every family in Iraq, and Sadoon's family was no exception. Many Iraqi Shias believed that the Sunni Iraqi government launched the war to kill as many Shias as possible on both sides of the borders. This led numerous Shia soldiers either to surrender to the Iranians or desert and go into hiding in the marshlands in the south. His son-in-law chose the first option and he later became a refugee in Norway – he probably never heard of Norway before that. Sadoon was faced with a dilemma. He did not want his daughter to become a stranger in a far-away country but stopping her from joining her husband was religiously and ethically unacceptable.

Sadoon realized later that marrying his daughter to Omran was a grave mistake. He was a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet and his daughter, Karima, was an *elwia*. Sayyids rarely gave their daughters in marriage to non-sayyids. He lived to regret breaking this centuries-old custom. But everyone said that Omran would make an excellent match for his daughter. He came from a nice family, kept traditional customs, observed religious duties, and he was only six years older than his daughter. He was born in the same village but later moved with his family to Baghdad. Unlike many emigrants, his family did not abandon their tribal roots and kept strong ties with their clan in the village. His education did not progress beyond middle school but this was also common among young men who often had to leave school to support themselves and their families. The consensus among all relatives and friends was that Omran would make a perfect son-in-law and he finally put aside his reservations and approved his marriage proposal.

Shias, Sunni Kurds and many Arab Sunnis in Iraq hold one person responsible for all the calamities that have befallen their country and its people as well as most of their personal problems. That person is Saddam Hussain. They blame him mainly for waging the eight-year war against Iran which killed hundreds of thousands of young men on both sides and for precipitating the second Gulf war by invading Kuwait. Furthermore, Saddam Hussain earned the ever-lasting hatred of the Shias for ransacking their cities and towns, desecrating their holy shrines, executing or assassinating their religious and political leaders, imprisoning hundreds of thousands of them, and destroying their livelihood and bringing many of them to the brink of starvation.

Soon after the beginning of the war between Iraq and Iran, Omran was drafted. He hated the war, opposed its objectives and wished that it would come to a speedy end. It is unclear whether or not he discussed the possibility of desertion with his wife. Every Iraqi soldier naturally hoped to survive the war or at least to escape permanent disability or death. Surrender to the Iranians was encouraged by stories of their generous treatment of Iraqi prisoners of war which were widely circulated and believed.

When Omran did not come home on leave for several weeks, the first thing that came to the minds of his family and friends was that leaves of absence must have been cancelled due to an escalation in military activities or in expectation of another Iranian offensive. They prayed for his safe return and assured Karima that he will soon come home. None spoke openly of the possibility of injury or death. Weeks passed without seeing or hearing from Omran and his family decided it was high time to make inquiries. After several trips to the local conscription office, his battalion's headquarters and field command post in the north, they were officially informed that Omran was considered 'missing in action'. They were also told then that this label was applied not only to military personnel who were really missing in action but also to deserters and those who surrendered to enemy forces.

The uncertainty of Omran's fate tortured his wife and family. Their worries were finally put to rest when they heard that he had defected to Iran. But his defection resulted in different worries. Iraqis live in object fear of the regime and its secret agents. Even those living abroad find it difficult to get rid of this deep-seated fear. Informers of the regime were everywhere and some of their major duties were spying on ordinary citizens, collecting information on dissident

activities and preparing and submitting regular reports with their findings. All members of the ruling party were also expected to perform this function. Defection to Iran was considered unforgivable treason by the Iraqi regime and all Iraqis were expected to strongly condemn the act and to scorn and vilify defectors. The family and friends of defectors were also suspected of encouraging or condoning their decision. To safeguard themselves against possible official retaliation, some families had to publicly disown relatives accused or suspected of opposing the regime. If asked for their opinions on Omran's defection, even members of his family and his closest friends were expected to criticize and condemn his deed. After a relative of mine appeared on television criticizing Saddam's regime for occupying Kuwait, several close members of our family sent a telegram to the tyrant disowning him and calling for his execution.

By defecting to the Iranian side, Omran proved that he was influenced more by his personal beliefs or perhaps survival needs rather than tribal norms. These norms put a high value on courage and consider it to be an integral part of the all-important trait of manliness. The roots of this value are deeply embedded in their long history of tribal disputes and feuds over farming and grazing land and water rights. Accordingly, tribal codes of behavior dictate that a man must act bravely and should never exhibit fear in words or deed. The stigma of cowardice is difficult to live with in a rural tribal community where a person's manhood is constantly tested by others and circumstances. The importance of this trait, or at least putting on a show of bravery, was made clear to me by a close relative who visited me on the day he was called up for military service. His pale face and trembling hands left me in no doubt about his psychological state. He was terrified and unable to control it. After some careful prodding on my part— given the large number of informers you could never be too cautious in even with close relatives – he confided in me that someone had offered to smuggle him out of the country but he declined because he did not want others to call him a coward.

Shias like my relative and Omran celebrate the memory of al-Hur al-Riyahi, a general in the army dispatched to fight Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet and third Imam of the Shias whose martyrdom deeply affected this sect and its beliefs. Al-Riyahi is revered because at the last moment he decided to defect to the small and vastly outnumbered Hussain's army. He made this brave choice although he knew that it meant his imminent death. Siding with the right cause and

defending righteousness and justice is a religious duty to the Shias but a good reputation and high standing in the community carry a greater weight among tribal people. Often tribal values supersede religious principles in the thinking and behavior of these people. Omran did what he believed to be his religious duty while my relative who did not wish to be called a coward chose to conform to tribal customs.

Omran left behind him his wife, Karima, and their three children: The oldest was a six-year-old boy and the youngest was an infant. Their middle child was a three-year-old girl and she was destined to witness the tragic event and carry its painful memory within her mind for the rest of her life. The year was 1985 and they had to wait seven years before seeing Omran again not in Iraq or Iran but in Norway.

Karima's traditional rural upbringing and the special status of her family in the community prepared her for the role of a devoted wife and a caring mother. Anything less than that would have been unacceptable to her family and local community. Another wife may have applied for an annulment of her marriage on the basis of long-term spousal desertion or separation and failure to provide for her financial needs and those of her children. Indeed, the Iraqi government encouraged and sometimes pressured wives like her to seek annulment of their marriage contracts to defectors like Omran or other Iraqi men whom the government had earlier exiled to Iran after revoking their citizenship on allegations of being of Iranian descent or harboring pro-Iran sentiments. Religious courts were also instructed to expedite the processing of such applications and to render favorable rulings on them. Many wives in her place may have chosen this option in view of the seemingly protracted nature of the war, and the Iraqi regime's successful hold on power after the disastrous first and second Gulf war. Needless to say, the voluntary return of their husbands was unthinkable as long as the current regime stayed in power. In spite of all those uncertainties, Karima remained faithful to her marriage vows. It was the only proper thing for a woman of her position and standing in society to do.

Omran's family knew little about his situation except that he was safe in Iran. The two countries were at war and all forms of communications between them had been severed. However, news about dissidents in Iran occasionally filtered through, conveyed by a friend who heard it from a friend and so on. One of those Iraqi dissidents living in Iran during the war told me that in his desperate efforts to communicate with his family in Iraq he risked his life by

crossing the borders, under a hail of bullets from Iraqi border patrols. After reaching the Kurdish-held area in the north with a bullet lodged in one foot he paid a local man a considerable sum of money to deliver a letter to his family in Baghdad asking his wife to join him in Iran. To his dismay, his wife refused.

For several years Omran worked with the Iraqi opposition operating in Iran. The nature of these activities remains unknown but apparently, he played a minor role in the opposition. He lived and worked among the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who were forced into exile to Iran. They were the victims of the most massive sectarian cleansing in the twentieth century. During the first months of the war, the regime's security police paid these unfortunate Iraqis unexpected visits. After confiscating their identity papers and valuables, they were escorted from their homes or places of work and business to the borders with Iran and instructed to walk to the other side and never come back on penalty of death. The Iraqi government claimed that they were all of Iranian origin whose loyalty to Iraq was suspect while Shias insist that they were driven out because of their sectarian affiliation and to intimidate the Shia population in general.

The vast majority of those banished Iraqis did not speak a single word of Farsi and many of them found it difficult to adjust to life in Iran. Later, some of them traveled to Syria and settled down in the town of al-Saida Zainab. Omran was not among them because foremost in his thinking was being reunited with his wife and children. This is why he chose to seek asylum in a European country. With this in mind, he left Iran to Pakistan where he applied to the United Nations Refugee Agency and subsequently his name was put on the list of asylum seekers. In 1991 he was granted permission to travel to Norway as a political refugee.

He arrived in Norway full of optimism, energy and enthusiasm. He socialized frequently with other Iraqi refugees and became an active member in an association for refugees funded by the Norwegian government. Leftist refugees founded the association but those who came after them to Norway did not share their ideological beliefs. Many of them like Omran had strong religious convictions and this put them at odds with the secular founders of the association.

One of the refugees who knew Omran well had the following wish for Omran. "I wish Omran had climbed into one of these hot air balloons, like the ones he used to sell, but of course much larger, and then it would rise high in the air and never come down again." This

refugee who wished that Omran would disappear into thin air was not one of the leftists who were annoyed by the competition from Omran and his religious associates. Actually, he was as pious as Omran but his sinister and unfeeling wish for Omran was in his opinion justified as will be revealed later. And balloons did feature in Omran's story.

Everyone agreed that Omran's idea of selling balloons in parks was an inspired business venture. Although they did not regard it as a proper job since it involved no mental activity and little physical effort, none of them laughed at him. And they were certainly impressed by the relatively decent income he earned from it.

His business required little investment. He did not need to rent a shop or kiosk and he could conduct his business in any municipal park. The law did not prohibit it and park attendants never attempted to stop him or interfere in his business as long as he abided by municipal by-laws. He only needed a helium gas cylinder and a supply of balloons. He filled the balloons with gas at home, loaded them in his car and drove to one of the parks where he sold them. There was no shortage of customers especially on weekends and holidays. Many Norwegian families frequented parks and they brought their children along with them. Omran did not have to shout or stand on a box like the hawkers in traditional bazaars in his country to attract the attention of his potential customers. No one could fail to notice his merchandise floating over his head. Proficiency in the Norwegian language was not necessary and he managed with few phrases and words such as the customary greetings, replies to queries about prices and the words for colors in Norwegian. Many of those who did not buy his balloons smiled and nodded their heads at him in encouragement. They probably assumed that he was a foreign worker trying to augment his wages by working on weekends and holidays. My informants did not know whether or not Omran declared his business income to the authorities. All of them agree that refugees are entitled to welfare assistance and any additional income earned by them should be tax exempt.

His profit margin was fifty per cent, which is a respectable return on investment. His business was thriving and after peddling his balloons in several parks for weeks he recognized that demand for them exceeded his supply by far. There were several parks in the Norwegian town where he lived and each one of them could accommodate a balloon peddler like him. Thus, when Adnan, a fellow refugee who also came from a tribal, rural community in southern Iraq, offered to work with him, Omran gladly consented. They reached an agreement, by

which Omran would act as the wholesale supplier: buying the balloons, filling them up with helium, and then selling them to Adnan at a reasonable price. Omran, who would continue to sell balloons in the parks, did not see any need to divide the parks between them. According to Omran's calculations, there was enough demand in one major park for both of them.

This arrangement between Omran and Adnan lasted for several months. Eventually, professional rivalries and disagreements over prices and profit shares soured the relationship. The spirit of friendship and comradeship disappeared and was replaced by acrimonious accusations. It began when Adnan became convinced that the terms of the arrangement were unfair to him. He also claimed that his cheerful attitude, love for children and natural selling skills helped to boost his sales figures and this, according to him, made Omran envious and resentful. Finally, Adnan decided to terminate the arrangement and start his own balloon business. He used his earning to buy a helium gas cylinder and a supply of balloons.

Traditional people believe that God alone prescribe a person's fortune, i.e. whether he becomes rich or poor and where he lives and dies. Thus, when you envy someone his good fortune or social status you are essentially objecting to preordained fate and God's will. After the breakup of their business arrangement, Omran went around telling other Iraqi refugees that Adnan robbed him of his business. Their friendship was naturally strained by Omran's bitter accusation.

"Other Iraqi refugees sided with me against Omran," Adnan recalled. Omran later admitted his mistake, apologized to Adnan and their friendship was restored.

In the meantime, Omran was eagerly seeking to realize his most cherished dream. He had applied to the Norwegian immigration authorities to grant his wife and three children asylum so that they can join him in Norway. They gave him several forms to fill and a list of documents to enclose with his application. He wasted no time in meeting all their conditions. Bureaucratic wheels grind slowly everywhere including Norway, and Omran grew impatient every day. Everyone agreed that he was a quiet, polite person who harbored no ill feelings and never behaved rudely toward anyone. It was therefore uncharacteristic of him when he slammed doors and kicked furniture in the immigration office after he was told again that his application was still under consideration and he should not expect an answer soon. The alarmed employees at the office stopped working and watched

him in shock, as he demanded at the top of his voice a speedy processing of his application. Was this display of anger brought upon by frustration or was it simply an act designed to intimidate the polite immigration officials into expediting his request? Some refugees believe that a fit of anger, whether real or faked, could sometimes produce fast and positive results because Norwegians and other Westerners are mainly unexcitable people who are not accustomed to such strong negative emotions. Believing that this was a genuine expression of dissatisfaction and frustration, these sympathetic and timid hosts were expected to act favorably and speedily on the refugees' requests.

There is of course the possibility that Omran was not acting and that he was actually venting his frustration. Many refugees experience psychological and emotional difficulties as a result of living within a foreign society whose cultural values and customs are vastly different from their own. It is therefore possible that Omran's violent fit of rage at the immigration office was genuine and exposed a trait in him, which was until then hidden from his friends and acquaintances in Norway. All the statements, comments and analyses offered by those who knew him well indicate that Omran did not show signs of deep psychological or emotional problems. Like all of them, he exhibited the occasional symptoms of homesickness and expressed his strong need to be reunited with his family. If he were suffering from serious problems, his friends argued, he would have stayed at home to sulk, picked fights with them or even committed suicide. According to their reasoning, only a rational, calculating and well-balanced person would look for a second occupation or business that would provide him with an additional income.

"Would an emotionally disturbed person purchase a second-hand station wagon with the money he saved from his welfare cheques and balloon business?" they reasoned. It was the consensus among them that he was of sound mind.

After purchasing the station wagon, he informed them that he was working now in the moving business and his services are available for hire. They were impressed again by his industriousness. Fellow refugees frequently changed residence and his services were in high demand.

Finally, the entry visas for his wife and children were granted. Those who called to congratulate him said that he was elated. He told them that he had already remitted funds to his father-in-law to cover all travel

expenses for his family. He also said that he awaited their arrival impatiently and was praying that nothing would delay their departure from Baghdad as soon as possible. Understandably, he was disappointed when he received a letter from his father-in-law suggesting that his daughter and their children should remain in Iraq until it was possible for him to return to his country. No one knew firsthand why his father-in-law made this suggestion but his friends thought that it was only expected from the old man to want his daughter and grandchildren living by his side. He and other members of his family become attached to his grandchildren. Another possible explanation is that he like many Iraqis at that time optimistically looked forward to a speedy overthrow of the regime allowing refugees to come back. The defeat of the Iraqi army in the second Gulf war, the insurrections in the south and the north and the economic sanctions convinced many that the days of the regime were numbered.

Omran did not give up. He sent his father-in-law another letter pleading with him to send his wife and children. The man finally relented and gave his consent. The visas were sent to the Norwegian embassy in Amman, the capital of Jordan, to where Karima and her children traveled by car. After having the visa stamped on their passports, they boarded a flight to Oslo.

"Ana Malik," Omran boasted to his friends after his wife and children arrived in Oslo. His words literally translate I am a king. He was clearly overjoyed and wanted everyone to know it. He called all his friends to tell them the good news with full details about the events and correspondence that preceded their arrival. Omran did not keep secrets from his friends.

They were not left alone to enjoy their union after a long separation. Invitations for lunch and dinner poured on them from friends and acquaintances that wanted to celebrate the family's reunion. He accepted all invitations as traditional customs dictate. His happiness was plainly evident to all those who saw him or shared a meal with him in those days. They all praised his wife and her conduct describing her as a modest, polite, gentlewoman who observed the Muslim codes of behavior and dress. She was an *elwia*, they emphasized, and nothing less was expected from a woman of her distinguished lineage and breeding.

"Her eyes were always downcast," one of them described her to me. Shyness in a female is not only a sign of high moral and ethical caliber but also a virtue in itself.

“She ate sparingly,” another friend added. Omran and his family were their guests for dinner. Omran, their host recalled, teased her about her shyness and urged her to eat more.

Shortly after, they moved from his apartment to a small house with a back garden. He also became entitled to social and other benefits reserved for families. Karima and her children wasted no time in adjusting to the Norwegian society. They were the envy of everyone.

When they were asked about relations within Omran’s household, his friends admitted that they did not know much about these because as they explained: “homes have secrets.” Before that Omran was very open and did not keep secrets from them. Then he suddenly became secretive and evasive in his answers. His friends assumed that he was now a family man who wanted his privacy. Without inside information none of them knew for sure why and how the relationship between Omran and his wife suddenly and rapidly deteriorated. With the same breath, they strongly reject assigning any importance to what may have transpired between Omran and his wife during the seven months between her arrival in Norway and that fateful day. They all, however, agree on one thing: Omran was a rational, sane human being who acted deliberately and with premeditation and, therefore, must be held accountable for his deed.

Omran’s madness

The first sign of a rift and trouble within Omran’s family surfaced with his decision to stop his wife from attending language classes at the language school. According to my informants, he never showed any interest in learning the Norwegian language and attended language classes only to keep an eye on his wife. Her interest in learning, however, was genuine but like any obedient wife she complied with his decision. After that her children, who continued to go to school, became her in-house tutors.

None of his friends dared to ask why he made her leave school. It was their private affair which concerned only them. Some may have wondered about the reason and given their tradition-bound, male-dominated culture they may have even asked themselves whether she gave him reason to take that decision.

Soon after, their home became Karima’s virtual prison and Omran was her jailer. His suspicions had obviously taken hold of his mind.

Friends who passed by their home could not help noticing that the windows were closed and the curtains drawn at all hours of the day. Also, he alone answered the telephone and the doorbell.

Then he began to hit her. It usually started with a disagreement over a minor thing and then developed into an argument. He was always the instigator of these domestic quarrels and he infrequently ended them by verbally and physically abusing her. Those who recalled to me this episode of the story were emotionally moved by it; the anger was clear in the tones of their voices and their facial expressions. They utterly disapproved of his behavior. Wife battering is common in Iraqi society and especially in rural and tribal communities where women traditionally occupy an inferior status. But Karima was not an ordinary woman, she was *elwia*. Verbal or physical abuse of a descendant of the Prophet, whether male or female, is a taboo. Sayyids exploited this tradition to effectively stop bloodshed and tribal wars by simply appearing at tribal battle scenes and standing between the warring parties. None dared to throw a spear or shoot at them, because hurting them or their families is not only socially reprehensible but would certainly bring upon the culprit swift and severe retribution from God.

The Arabic word *siter* literally means a cover such as a blanket, a veil or a dress. The social value of *siter* is highly important for Iraqis in general, and especially rural people, who are constantly mindful of their reputation and social status. It is often mentioned in their prayers. In effect it is an admission that they are imperfect human beings who err and commit sins and thus need God to cover up these sins and failings. Naturally, people did not willingly reveal shameful secrets about themselves and their families to strangers. The exception was to confide in a close family member such as a father or a brother either to obtain support or advice on how to deal with the problem or simply to relieve some of the tension and frustration generated by a shameful act. Omran had no relatives in Norway except his wife and their three minor children.

Omran kept the curtains at his home closed all times –*sitara* or curtain is also derived from the word *siter* –but he failed to abide by the traditional value of privacy for long. Keeping the secret to himself must have tormented him continuously. Without the support of his extended family, a tradition-bound person like Omran lived in a social limbo or void. He must have felt lonely and detached from the rest of the world. How long did he languish in his private hell before confiding in his friends? No one knows for sure. But he was obviously drowning in the

quagmire of his suspicions and unable to deal with his inner demons desperately reached out for advice and support.

Discussing a family secret with a friend, no matter how close that friend is, contradicted the value of *siter* and clearly revealed the extent of Omran's desperation. He confided his shameful and extremely painful secret to two of his friends. As proof of his suspicion he gave them the incriminating letters to read then he confronted them with the questions that troubled his mind:

"What am I supposed to do? Should I kill her or not?" His questions clearly revealed his unsettled state of mind. His friends were shocked by the anonymous letters, which accused Omran's wife, Karima, of being unfaithful to him. They dismissed these allegations as false and malicious and urged him to exercise his good judgment and not to behave irrationally. His confidants were unprepared both culturally and professionally to discuss fully this problem with Omran and help him in finding a rational solution. And they were not the typical authority figures whom he would usually approach for advice and guidance.

Whoever sent those letters wanted to hurt Omran and his family. They knew very well the seriousness of their allegations, their impact on Omran and possible dire consequences. According to tribal customs, a person's honor largely depends on the proper behavior of his female relatives. Sexual liaisons outside marriage are strictly forbidden on penalty of death. Although this norm applies to both men and women, it is rigorously enforced on women in accordance with the double standard found in these communities. Sometimes, a malicious accusation or rumor concerning a woman's honor is sufficient to tarnish a woman's good reputation. Traditional norms dictate that only the shedding of a woman's blood can wash off the shame brought upon her family by her improper sexual behavior. Although 'honor killing' contradicts Islamic rules, it is still practiced in some Middle Eastern tribal communities. Even a non-traditional person living in that part of the world may be moved by such accusations or suspicions to kill or at least divorce his wife. To safeguard against wanton accusations and malicious allegations, many still refuse to reveal the names of their female relatives to strangers. Husbands usually refer to their wives as the *Um*, i.e. mother, followed by the name of their eldest son. An accusation that referred to the woman by her proper name would be more likely to be accepted as true.

The so-called 'honor killing' is still practiced in Iraqi tribal and urban communities till this day. My father was a tribal chief who adjudicated

disputes in our tribe. Thus, when a tribesman was informed by a neighbor that he had killed his adulterous wife he sought my father's judgment. The husband claimed that he found his wife in bed with another man who fled the scene. According to my informant, my father instructed him to help in burying the wife in secrecy. He was not surprised to find that the wife's head had been severed and could not fail to notice her beautiful hair. He and the husband ferried the body of the slain woman in a canoe to a deserted area where she was buried without the usual ablution and other religious rituals. Neither my father nor my informant questioned the husband's story. They probably covered up the wife's sudden disappearance by speculating that she fell in the river, drowned and her body was carried away by the strong current.

Whoever wrote those anonymous letters must also share in responsibility for the action that resulted from them. Omran did not have enemies that hated him to the extent of wanting to hurt him and his family. Who was this Iago or Iagoes that schemed to bring about the downfall of Omran and his family? It is no wonder that Othello in the Shakespearean play by the same name, whom many believe to be a modification of the Arabic name Att'allah, is of a North African origin. This explains his fury over his wife's alleged infidelity. But even Iago had a good reason to hate the triumphant Othello.

Those who read the letters told me they do not know for certain who wrote them. Others, however, claim otherwise. The police thoroughly searched Omran's house but did not find the letters. Did someone take the letters and hid them from the police? His friends who read them admitted to me that they conspired to deprive him of benefiting from them in his defense. They met together and took a solemn oath to deny any knowledge of the existence of these letters to the police. By doing that they were obstructing the course of justice, but according to their reasoning, they were actually trying to ensure 'true' justice be done in this case.

One of these friends met with Omran during that fateful week. He called at his house to ask if Omran could help him in moving some furniture. According to him, Omran behaved strangely and his statements were confused and incoherent. He was irritated by Omran's unjustified refusal to make a firm commitment regarding the moving job. Few days later, he understood why Omran behaved oddly on that day.

A group of Iraqi refugees, some of whom knew Omran well, were watching the news on television that evening when a familiar face suddenly appeared on the screen. The face was unmistakably Omran's. Their knowledge of the Norwegian language, however, was rudimentary and insufficient to completely understand what they were saying about Omran. The broadcaster moved on to another news item before they could put together the bits and piece of information gleaned from the news. In order to satisfy their curiosity, one of them called a friend. The following dialogue between them was reported:

"Are you watching the news?"

"Yes! Did you see Omran?"

"Why was he in the news bulletin?"

"He killed his wife."

The news bulletin reported that Omran killed his wife by stabbing her with a knife. A total of fifty-five stab wounds were found on her mutilated body. She died before a paramedic team arrived at their home. The police named her husband as the murderer after he made a full confession to them.

"I am the brother of Himiar." Himiar is the name of Omran's tribe. "I killed her."

Omran uttered those words as he came out of the kitchen after stabbing his wife repeatedly. His two sons heard him and saw him holding the bloodstained knife in his hand. His ten-year old daughter was with them in the kitchen and witnessed her father stabbing her mother repeatedly.

The children told the police that it began with an argument. It has become a usual scene in their tense household. Then Omran picked up the knife and stabbed his wife and did not stop until she was dead.

As the words he repeated after killing her indicate, Omran believed that he was fulfilling the tribal custom of cleansing the honor of his family. After convincing himself of his wife's infidelity he was no longer able to live with the shame and he did what many tribal men in his place would have done: kill the woman responsible for bringing dishonor to his name and reputation. By declaring he was Himiar's brother he was asserting that his tribal honor has been restored after slaying his wife and he was worthy again of the brotherhood and respect of his kinsmen.

Omran made no attempt to escape or resist arrest by the police. His shocked and grieving children were taken by the authorities and later placed in the care of a friend's family.

Death to Omran!

Fellow refugees reacted to the news of the brutal murder with horror, disbelief and sadness. Those who observed recent changes in his character and his odd behavior said that they did not imagine that this would happen. None of his friends, according to my informants, could find any sympathy in their hearts for Omran. They all dismissed the allegation of her infidelity as absurd and untrue. Karima was a revered *e/wia*, a faithful wife and a devoted mother and she did not deserve to die in such a horrible way and in front of her children.

Their anger at Omran and his deed intensified after more details about the case were made public. The results of the autopsy performed on Karima's body showed that she was seven-month pregnant with twins. A DNA test also confirmed that Omran was undoubtedly the father of the unborn children. None of their friends were surprised by these findings.

Omran became the target of vilification and loathing of Iraqi refugees. He has not only killed his faithful, innocent wife in a brutal manner but he also tarnished their image among their Norwegian hosts. All Arabs like to boast in front of strangers about their high ethical standards and good manners. By committing his heinous crime, Omran has undermined their image. They were worried that their hosts would no longer treat them with respect and compassion and may even discriminate against them. Those who have applied for reunion visas for their family members feared that their requests would not be granted or approvals would be unduly delayed as a result of this crime.

They were irritated by the media's interest in Omran's story and wished that the whole story would soon be buried and forgotten. A swift trial or even summary justice would have met with their enthusiastic approval. But Norway is a law-abiding nation and the due process of law must be followed to ensure justice is done. Refugees following developments closely were disappointed by news report questioning Omran's sanity. Apparently, available evidence was not sufficient to convict him on charges of premeditated murder.

Norway, they agreed, proved to be a gracious host again by granting Karima's parents entry visas. Naturally, her family was informed of her murder. Her father decided to travel alone to Oslo. In the meantime,

everyone was concerned about the emotional and psychological welfare of the children. Witnessing their mother's murder at the hand of their father was an extremely traumatic experience by any standard. A friend of the family –who is also one of my informants– offered to accommodate them with his family until their grandfather arrived. The Norwegian social services agency approved.

“The first few weeks were extremely painful for the children,” the family friend recalled. “We were instructed not to allow any visitor to see them. Also, they were not supposed to hear or see any news bulletin which may remind them of the tragic events of that day.”

The young Iraqi refugee, who shared the same tribal origin as Omran, was emotionally moved by his recollection of the murder and its aftermath.

“We tried everything to keep them preoccupied and to distract their minds from memories of that dark day in their lives. They needed time and care so that the psychological process of healing can succeed.” The family's friend who took them in his home is a religious person who believed that a strong faith can overcome all problems and obstacles.

“I advised the little girl, who witnessed the stabbing of her mother, to try her best to put aside the events of that day and she replied: ‘Uncle! How can I ever forget? I was standing next to them in the kitchen when my father killed my mother.’ We did the best we can and the rest was left to God”.

“Everyone did his best to help,” he humbly refused to take all the credit for helping the children. “They brought them toys, games and books.”

Another refugee added that the children suffered the most among the living survivors of the murder. They became orphaned; their mother was dead and they will never see their father again. For traditional Iraqis who put a high value on family life and ties, this is a fate worse than death. The loss of a family is a severe blow to someone who learns his moral and ethical values from his family and relies on it for life-long social and financial support.

From his jail, Omran made several telephone calls to his friends. He also tried to call his son. The fourteen-year old boy agreed to talk to him but only to say that he will not answer his calls again because he does not consider him to be his father anymore. In a traditional society, it is usually the father who disowns an errant son and not the other way around.

Was Omran experiencing remorse? His friends did not dismiss this possibility but they were reluctant to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Omran's father-in-law finally arrived. It was exactly forty days after his daughter's murder. The children who had spent most of their lives with their grandfather in Iraq were happy to see him again but everyone wished that the reunion happened under different circumstances. After comforting his grandchildren, his main concern was burying his daughter. It is customary among his people to bury their deceased within few days and his daughter's funeral and burial had been delayed for too long. He wanted to take her back with him to their homeland where her family can give her a proper burial near the shrine of her revered ancestor. They made inquiries on his behalf with the airline. They were told that the cost of airlifting the coffin to Amman in Jordan would amount to ten thousand dollars. He did not have that amount. One of the Iraqi refugees suggested setting up a fund and soliciting donations. The idea met with the enthusiastic approval of all refugees. They launched an intensive campaign but, in the end, the collected amount was several thousand short of the target. Karima's father was naturally disappointed but he had no choice but to bury his daughter in Norway where she met her horrible death only seven months after her arrival.

After burying his Karima, her father wanted to take his grandchildren back with him to Iraq. But first he needed the approval of the Norwegian authority that assumed temporary custody of them in view of their mother's death and their father's imprisonment. When he contacted these authorities, he was told that they had an offer for him. They were prepared to grant him and his wife custody of the children if they choose to reside in Norway. He readily accepted. The Norwegian government also offered to pay all travel expenses for him and his wife. According to my informants, Iraqi refugees applauded the Norwegian generosity

Before departing to Iraq, the grandfather wanted to visit his son-in-law in jail. The meeting was brief. The old man called him Omran and not my son or son-in-law as the custom is. When Omran saw him, he took one step backward. He probably never expected to see his father-in-law in Norway.

"Uncle, I didn't do it. They did." These were his only words to his father-in-law.

He was not asked whom he was referring to by 'they'. The Norwegian psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who were assessing his

mental and psychological fitness probably understood this as a reference to the 'inner voices' that inflamed his suspicions and drove him to murder his wife. For the Iraqis who knew him personally and were aware of the existence of the anonymous letters, 'they' probably referred to the authors of those letters. The letters were not found in Omran's house and his friends had all agreed between themselves to deny seeing or hearing about them after learning from an official interpreter working for the state prosecutor that this piece of evidence could have a significant impact on the court's final verdict. Unless Omran could present these letters or have them testify in confirmation of their existence, he could not use them in his defense.

As far as they were concerned, the existence of the letters could help Omran's lawyer to plead temporary insanity resulting from severe emotional distress. If the court rules in favor of this plea, Omran would probably be sent to a psychiatric hospital and obtain a release after a short stay. They were hoping that their silence would help to convict Omran of premeditated murder and earn him a long-term sentence. Some even wished that the government would bring back capital punishment just to apply it to Omran.

Omran's friends and fellow refugees believed that they were justified in turning against him and condemning him as a murderer. It is also sad that none of them was willing to take into consideration his emotional and psychological state when he committed his crime. They painted two completely different pictures of him: before and after the crime. Before that he was a normal, sane person and after that he became a raging monster. They all said that he was a polite, even-tempered person. His ambition and industriousness distinguished him from the majority of refugees who were content with living on their welfare cheques. Although they maintained that he kept on good terms with everyone and had no enemies, someone hated him enough to send him these poisonous letters. One of his friends suspected one of the leftists whom Omran replaced in the refugee association but he had no proof.

The letters obviously unsettled Omran's mind and he became obsessed with the idea of his wife's infidelity. A person living among his people would be less willing to believe rumors regarding his wife's behavior, unless confirmed by relatives living with them under the same roof or their next-door neighbors. And he would not have taken drastic action such as killing or divorcing her before consulting family members and elders. Recourse to these traditional sources of counsel

and guidance was denied to Omran because he was living in Norway. Living far from his family and close relatives he turned to his friends. He was clearly seeking their help and advice when he showed two of them the accusing letters and asked them: 'should I kill her?' His friends failed to see the depth and seriousness of his predicament although all the signs were there. Regrettably, they were unprepared and ill equipped to give him the necessary help and guidance. What Omran desperately needed was traditional family support and an authority figure to advise him on what he should do. It was obviously not enough to tell a person in his confused and tormented state of mind to think rationally and to take into consideration the interests of his children. Consequently, he was left with his nagging doubts, and his long forced separation from his wife made it easy for him to believe the worst about her behavior.

By taking his wife's life, Omran believed he was only doing the proper thing required by his traditional customs and expected from him by his elders and peers. He was probably convinced that his deed would earn him the respect and admiration of his friends and other refugees. This is why he called upon fellow tribal members to take note of his deed. Instead, they condemned him for murdering his innocent wife and resented him even more for projecting a negative image of them and their social background which their Norwegian hosts already viewed as unacceptable or even barbaric. None of them was willing to take into consideration his disturbed emotional state and the fact that he never committed a crime before. For all these reasons they conspired to keep vital evidence from the police investigators and begrudged Omran even their pity.

Regardless of the court's verdict or what his friends thought, Omran's case clearly indicates the vulnerability of Iraqi refugees living abroad to a variety of social and psychological problems. Their host societies and fellow refugees and exiles may not be able to help these individuals in facing their problems and solving them. When all had been said and analyzed, Iraqi refugees and other exiles never fail to lay responsibility on the Iraqi regime that forced them to leave their country and exposed them to all these problems. The stories of their journey into the unknown and sometimes troubled world of refugees begin in the refugee camp and this is the theme of the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Stories from Refugee Camps

Even before the discovery and commercial exploitation of oil in the mid-twentieth century, Iraq was a rich country endowed with abundant fertile land and two great rivers. It was called by the early Moslem Arab warriors *al-Sawad*, i.e. the dark land, because of its thick groves of date palm trees. Its agricultural and commercial riches made Iraq attractive to many immigrants from neighboring countries. Nomads from Arabia flocked to Iraq in times of drought to escape starvation. Many Turkish officials in the Ottoman local administration opted to stay and make Iraq their permanent home after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For many centuries, many Shias from Persia, Afghanistan, India and other nations came to visit the shrines in Iraq and were driven by spiritual and other factors to adopt it as their country. In the early twentieth century, large numbers of displaced Assyrians and Armenians found safe haven in Iraq and were subsequently naturalized. In the 1980s, the trend shifted with Iraqis leaving their country or forced into exile.

The Iraqi exodus

Economic hardship or other reasons seldom led Iraqis leave their country and seek refuge elsewhere. This situation, however, changed after the coup d'état of 1968, which brought to power the Ba'th regime. Few years later, the government began the forced expatriation of Iranian residents. During the early years of the Iran-Iraq war, a large number of Iraqis who were of Iranian origin or their ancestors chose the Iranian nationality to escape the dreaded military conscription in the Ottoman army were also stripped of their nationality and their possessions, detained and then forcibly expelled to Iran. The Iranian government treated them as refugees and temporarily housed them in special camps near the borders. More refugees also entered Iran after the second Gulf war. Most of the refugees in these camps were eventually allowed to leave them and reside in Iranian cities and towns.

The second large exodus of Iraqi refugees occurred after the suppression of the popular uprisings in the south and the north in 1991. Kurdish civilians fled their towns in fear of the advancing Iraqi army but later most of them returned to the Kurdish enclave. Concurrently, the

suppression of the Shia uprising in the south resulted in a large movement of refugees into the area controlled by the American forces and their allies. These forces later withdrew and the Iraqi refugees were housed in special camps in northern Saudi Arabia. A smaller number of Iraqis crossed the Syrian borders and were also settled in a camp.

Since the early 1970s, Syria has been the favorite destination for many Iraqi dissidents and exiles. Rivalries between the regimes in Syria and Iraq, the absence of entry and residence restrictions on Arab nationals and the fact that both countries shared the same language and cultural heritage were the main factors that made Syria attractive. After the second Gulf war, Iraqis also came to Syria as refugees and were housed in a camp in northeast Syria.

Saudi Arabia also became a country of refuge for Iraqi prisoners of war who did not wish to be repatriated and rebels who took part in the unsuccessful Shia uprising. Most of the Kurdish refugees who fled to Iran and Turkey eventually returned to the security zone established by the Allied forces in northern Iraq but many Kurds displaced by interethnic fighting and renewed threats from the Iraqi government forces lived in refugee camps within Iraq for many years.

Life in refugee camps

Life in a refugee camp became an integral part of the experiences of many Iraqi refugees. It sets them apart from those who left the country later for mainly financial reasons after the imposition of economic sanctions. In comparison with these, they consider themselves to be genuine refugees who fled Iraq to escape repression, imprisonment or even execution.

Memories about life in a refugee camp are sad and recalling them is painful. These were extremely turbulent times in their lives, which began with their flight from pursuing Iraqi forces. Some of them escaped with their families whose safety became a nagging concern. Others left their families behind and were naturally worried that they may become the targets of the Iraqi regime's retaliatory measures against Shias and Kurds. Some of these worries and concerns disappeared or eased off after they settled down in refugees camps only to be replaced by new anxieties over the possibility of forceful repatriation to Iraq and the uncertainty of their future in general.

None of them was of course prepared for life in a refugee camp. Some of them may have heard about the 'Armenian camp' in Baghdad named after the influx of Armenian refugees from Turkey into that neighborhood. Others may have seen pictures or watched documentaries of Palestinians languishing in refugee camps. But none of them was ready for a lengthy residency in a refugee camp.

Refugees had to adjust to internment in refugee camps and these adjustments were frequently described as difficult and painful. They came to these camps with certain expectations that were often unfulfilled. Refugees referred to themselves as guests who were driven by forces beyond their control to leave their homeland and seek sanctuary with their neighbors. Arabs are bound by age-old traditions to treat all their guests with respect and generosity. Also, the traditional norm regarding refugee rights or *dakhala* requires Arabs to protect and give shelter and sustenance to anyone who asked for it even if he was their mortal enemy. A person was automatically granted this privilege upon declaring the following words: I am your *dakheel* or refugee. According to tribal customs, a person who kills or harms a guest or refugee must be severely punished by his own tribe. Some tribal elders in southern Iraq still recall the tragic story of the chieftain of a major tribe and his transgressing son. A number of the chieftain's guests were robbed and killed shortly after they had left his encampment and trackers traced the robbers to the tent of the chieftain's son. The chieftain ordered the execution of his son and his accomplices and instructed his tribe to leave its ancestral grazing land and waterholes because they failed to maintain their honorable name and unblemished reputation among neighboring tribes.

These refugees who saw themselves as temporary guests or *dakheels* and expected to be treated as such in accordance with traditional norms and customs were naturally disappointed when their hosts failed to live up to these expectations. Indeed, many of them became firmly convinced that their hosts were reluctant to accept them in the first place and were eager to be rid of them as soon as possible. The treatment they frequently received at the hands of camp officials and guards was far from that traditionally accorded to a guest in the Middle East. Camp administrations laid down detailed rules, and strict regulations restricting their personal freedom, and these restrictions were strictly enforced. As a result, many refugees came to regard these camps as virtual prisons. Relations with camp officials were not always cordial and trouble-free. Also, communications between

refugees and camp administrators were not always smooth and productive. Refugees complained that camp officials sometimes neglected their legitimate demands, and mistreated, insulted and abused them.

Racial, ethnic and sectarian differences further soured relations between refugees and their hosts. The Turkish government, which admitted hundreds of thousands of Kurds fleeing the Iraqi forces, was at that time waging a relentless campaign to suppress a guerrilla war waged by a faction of its Kurds. Iran, which acted as host to the majority of Iraqi refugees before and immediately after the Second Gulf war, was for eight years a victim of Iraqi aggression. Leading Sunni Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia which hosted Iraqi refugees that had sought asylum with the Allied Force during the second Gulf war regard the Shias as heretics and mutual animosities between the two sides are deeply rooted.

Relationships among refugees themselves were not always harmonious. Refugees came from different cultural, social, economic and religious backgrounds. They brought with them their old prejudices, stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes and behavior. Tribal loyalties and rivalries emerged to create further disagreements and conflicts. The political activities of some refugees within the camps also underlined the lack of consensus among them over many issues. In view of all of these factors, misunderstandings between refugees and representatives of their hosts were bound to happen and occasionally these escalated into violent clashes.

At the personal level, not all refugees managed to adapt themselves successfully to the requirements of a lengthy sojourn in a refugee camp and consequently suffered from emotional and psychological problems. Most of them had never before traveled abroad or had been separated from their families for long stretches of time. Homesickness became so unbearable for some of them that they chose to return to Iraq regardless of the severe official retributions awaiting them. Medical personnel in these camps were often unable to diagnose and treat those who suffered serious psychological problems, and few of the maladjusted refugees committed suicide. And in spite of the strict security measures in these camps there were cases of murder, assaults and other serious crimes. However, the majority of refugees managed to survive the hardship of living in a refugee camp.

Stories from refugee camps

Most of the stories about life in refugee camps were obtained from refugees who stayed in Saudi Arabia. In addition, fewer stories were collected from refugees in Iranian, Turkish and Syrian camps. All these stories report how these persons viewed and experienced life in a refugee camp. These accounts also describe various social, economic and personal problems encountered by them and their attempts to solve them and improve living conditions within their camps.

Refugees in Iranian camps found the language barrier frustrating in the beginning at least. On the other hand, the emotional bonds between them and their hosts resulting from belonging to the same sect and sharing essentially the same views toward the Iraqi regime helped the refugees in overcoming adaptation obstacles. A number of these refugees decided later to seek asylum in other countries where better work opportunities and higher standards of living are available. Omran, whose tragic story was told in the previous chapter, was one of those refugees who opted to leave Iran and apply for refugee status elsewhere.

Stories from refugees who spent some time in camps based in Turkey also described the problems, frustrations and anxieties experienced by them. Kurdish refugees in those camps had a long list of complaints about living conditions. Mutual mistrust between them and their Turkish hosts made communication between the two sides difficult. Refugees were generally unsatisfied with the responsiveness of Turkish officials to their legitimate needs. This inhospitable treatment also intensified their feelings of sadness, homesickness, and insecurity.

The stories of refugees stationed in the small camp in Syria have common and unique themes in comparison with stories from other refugees. Some of these common topics were the feelings of homesickness, loneliness and anxieties over an uncertain future. Like refugees in other camps they felt ignored and neglected by the world. They sadly described how they sat every day waiting impatiently for new developments that would usher optimism in their lives. They told of how news of a visitor coming to the camp cheered them up and raised their hopes. They did not complain about provisions or the treatment of camp officials but some were bitterly critical of Iraqis living in Syria in general and especially leaders of opposition groups. Visits to the camps by these more fortunate Iraqis were described as rare

and unproductive. The gifts of food provisions, blankets and other necessities brought by these visitors were appreciated but refugees were disappointed with the general apathy toward their problems and aspirations. They strongly disapproved of Iraqis who had some influence with their Syrian hosts for failing to intercede on their behalf. According to these stories, Muslim refugees in this camp suffered more than their Christian counterparts. It must be noted, however, that all these accounts were collected from Muslim refugees. They reported with undisguised envy that Christian refugees received frequent visits from local Christian clergymen and dignitaries who did not come only to distribute copies of the Bible and conduct mass on Sundays and Christian religious occasions. These Christian leaders were believed by Muslim refugees to be actively involved in promoting and defending the interests of refugees belonging to their faith. In specific, clergymen who were thought to have considerable influence with embassies of European and North American countries used it to obtain speedy processing and approval of applications for refugee status by Iraqi Christians in this camp.

The most informative and interesting stories about the quality of life in refugee camps for Iraqis were obtained from those who lived in the Saudi Arabian camps, which are told in the following sections. Since this book is a collection of stories told by Iraqi refugees, it reflects only their viewpoints and experiences. It must also be remembered that the stories presented here do not represent the total experiences of all refugees who lived in these camps. Although the vast majority of them were Shia and from the southern part of the country, they differed in terms of their political beliefs, religious observance and tribal loyalties. It is therefore incorrect to treat all of them as a single group.

From the Iraqi frying pan into the sizzling hot Saudi sands

The stories of many Iraqi refugees began with the suppression of the *intifada*, or the uprising in southern Iraq. After the defeat of the Iraqi forces and their withdrawal from Kuwait, a large number of disenchanted army conscripts and tribesmen staged a local uprising. Army barracks, government buildings and party offices were seized and most of the major cities and towns in the area fell under their control. Few weeks later, the well-trained and heavily armed troops of the Presidential Guards marched down from their bases near the

capital and ruthlessly suppressed the uprising. Many of those who took part in the insurrection and were not killed or imprisoned by the Iraqi forces fled either eastward toward the borders with Iran or sought refuge with the American-led multinational force in the desert near the borders with Saudi Arabia. Some of these defeated and desperate rebels brought with them their families. The United States army units allowed them to stay within the occupied areas and provided them with basic provisions and services. When these units began their withdrawal from Iraqi territory back into Saudi Arabia, a decision was made to take these refugees with them. A tent camp was hastily erected near the Saudi-Iraqi borders to accommodate them. Soon the camps were full of rows after rows of tents.

The first days in these camps were reportedly hectic. The refugees were far from being a homogenous group. There were among them prisoners of war who refused to return to Iraq, civilian rebels who fought against the Iraqi regime's forces and lost, soldiers who joined the rebellion and the families of many of them. The Americans were preparing to withdraw their troops from the area and wanted the Saudis to assume full administration and control of the camp. It was certainly a major challenge for the Saudis. They had no prior experience in running such camps and there was little time to prepare and train them for this responsibility. The number of refugees was already in the tens of thousands and the influx continued; new refugees were arriving every day and required accommodation, catering, medical services and more paperwork.

While the problems facing the camp administration in this initial period were mainly administrative and logistical, the major concerns of the refugees were shelter and food for themselves and their families accompanying them. More serious problems emerged after the refugees settled down and began to think about their status in these camps and their future.

Shelter took the form of a tent and each family or single refugee was accommodated in a separate tent. In conformity with religious and tribal customs, families were separated from bachelors. Families were stationed in the camp at Artawiah while bachelors were accommodated in a number of smaller camps. Single refugees were grouped by the administrative district in which they had resided back in their country and these camps were accordingly known by the name of that district, i.e. Baghdad, al-Najaf, al-Samawa and so on. This

arrangement was expected to contribute to greater harmony among refugees and to make the task of managing them relatively easier.

Refugees had several reasons to be grateful to the Saudis for. They were especially impressed by the generosity of their Saudi hosts according to the following testimony:

When it came to food, the Saudis were undeniably generous. Without exaggeration, I can testify to the fact that they distributed among us provisions enough to feed twice the number of refugees in our camp. Every day, several truckloads of provisions filled with meat, rice, vegetables and several kinds of fruits arrived at the camp.

Another refugee confirmed this by saying: "No one can claim that we did not get enough food. We had more meat than we could possibly eat and we regrettably had to throw away some of it."

Maintaining a good name or reputation is of paramount importance for Arabs. A person who does not act generously toward his guests earns the contempt of his community. The code of generosity compels traditional Arabs to offer their guests the best kind of food they can afford. The variety, richness and amount of food presented in these meals are often the usual measures of their generosity. Meat is traditionally the main dish in their meals, and the principal indicator of a person's generosity toward his guests. According to these tribal standards shared by Saudis and Iraqis alike, the generosity of food provisions distributed to Iraqi refugees was beyond doubt.

Surplus food encouraged a number of refugees to open their tent-side restaurants as the following statement indicated:

Throwing away meat or any other kind of food is *haram* i.e. religiously unlawful. A number of entrepreneurial refugees opened their own restaurants which offered grilled meat and other meat dishes on their menus. Their regular clientele were mainly bachelors, and there was sufficient demand for their services to keep them comfortably in business.

In addition to the shelter and food, refugees were paid monthly allowances of two hundred riyals per person in accordance with international treaties on refugees. Medical services were provided at first by American teams who were later replaced by Saudis. One of the refugees remembered with admiration an American male nurse who

carried the intravenous drip for a wounded Iraqi soldier while he performed his prayers.

In accordance with traditional customs also, Saudi officials gave preferential treatment to tribal sheikhs or chieftains among the refugees. This was a wise policy. Gaining the goodwill and cooperation of these leaders could facilitate the task of managing these camps. The chieftains of a major tribe reported that they were given a large tent to accommodate their guests and provisions sufficient to entertain them. Traditionally, guests of a tribal chieftain expect to be served tea and coffee during all times of the day and hot meals at midday. One of them was satisfied with the treatment accorded by Saudi officials to his brother, the principal chieftain of the tribe and expressed this satisfaction in the following words:

Senior Saudi officials who visited the camp came to see and chat with my brother. Even Prince Sultan the Minister of Defense met with him. They showed us much respect. They addressed us as sheikhs and inquired regularly about our needs. They promised to do everything possible to make our stay comfortable. After we pitched up the large tent that served as our *mudhaif*, i.e. traditional guesthouse, they gave us air coolers to install in it.

These tribal chieftains and religious dignitaries could have played a significant role in promoting cordial and productive relations between the Saudi camp officials and Iraqi refugees. They could have also been instrumental in introducing a degree of self-management and organization among the refugees. The continued presence of these traditional leaders and dignitaries inside the camps would have certainly benefited both sides. However, the aspirations of some of these dignitaries went beyond helping the Saudis in running these camps and the Saudis were prepared to accommodate these aspirations.

“They later invited us,” i.e. the tribal chieftains, “to go to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, where we stayed in the best hotels. They also promised to accommodate us in villas or apartments and put chauffeured cars at our disposal...if we consent to join the political group of their choice.”

Apparently, securing the help of these traditional leaders in running these camps came second in importance to another more strategic importance concerning the future of Iraq. After the end of the second Gulf war, the Saudi government became active in organizing a wide-

based coalition of groups opposed to the Iraqi regime. It was hoped that this coalition would eventually succeed in overthrowing and replacing it. According to some refugees, the Saudis were competing with other regional powers such as Iran to become the major sponsor of the Iraqi opposition which everyone expected to replace the Ba'th regime.

These tribal chieftains who were encouraged to move to Riyadh, hundreds of miles away from the refugee camps, became physically separated from their loyal followers in the camps and could no longer maintain daily contacts with them. Their absence left a leadership vacuum behind and made the task of the Saudi administrators of the camps even more difficult. These administrators were deprived of a valuable link with the refugees. The refugees also lost the important service provided by these leaders in representing their needs and grievances to the Saudi administrators. Traditional leaders who knew well the tribal codes and their judgments were widely respected and followed also played an important role in resolving disagreements and conflicts among refugees peacefully. All these potential advantages of having these chieftains within the camps were lost after they left to the Saudi capital.

Some refugees argued that the continued presence of these leaders inside the camps and their active and responsible involvement in running these camps would have helped in reducing frictions between the refugees and their hosts or at least in averting their escalation into violent confrontations.

What led to these violent clashes between the Iraqi refugees and their Saudi hosts? Each side blamed the other for the unfortunate and sad events. However, only the refugees' version of these events is presented here.

As mentioned earlier, the refugees did not have serious complaints about the services provided by the Saudis and were generally satisfied with these services. Nevertheless, they strongly disapproved of the nature of these camps and the way in which they were managed. They noted in particular the strong Saudi military and security presence in them. Heavily armed guards patrolled the perimeters of the camps at all times. These guards controlled incoming and outgoing traffic and no one was allowed to enter or leave the camps without a permit. According to one refugee who spent over a year in one of these camps, these were essentially military camps not for refugees but for prisoners of war.

The refugees regarded the Saudi restrictions on their movements and the large contingent of military and security personnel to be excessive and provocative. They were also disappointed by their designation by the Saudis as 'welcome guests', which indicated that they had no intention of accepting them as permanent refugees. Also, many of the refugees were conscripts who deserted the Iraqi army and took part in the insurrection resented Iraqi officers who are mostly Sunni Muslims and members of the ruling Ba'th party. The attitudes and behavior of Saudi officers responsible for administering and guarding the camps may have reminded them of their hated Iraqi superiors.

Another refugee looked at it from another perspective: "It is customary for an Arab to accommodate his guests for three days. We have been in these camps for more than three years. I think we have overstayed our welcome." Another refugee had the following explanation to offer:

To [the Saudis] we were still Iraqis. The Iraqi army had recently attempted to invade their country, and in specific that part of their country where their precious oilfields are located.

A number of refugees admitted that some of the blame for the souring of relations between them and their hosts fell on unruly elements among the refugees. These refugees were apparently involved in violent incidents that alarmed the Saudis and led them to distrust the refugees and adopt strict policies and measures toward them. Who were these persons responsible for tarnishing the refugee's image among the Saudis? The refugees pointed an accusing finger at two different groups of people: alleged agents of the Iraqi government and escaped convicts.

Refugees who shared their memories with the author insisted that their camps were infiltrated by secret agents of the Iraqi Ba'th government. These agents were allegedly sent by the Iraqi security agencies to spy on refugees and to provoke trouble among them.

"They came here to stir things up," one refugee asserted. "There were frequent quarrels between them and other refugees." When the *mudhaif* or guest tent of the tribal chieftain mentioned earlier was burned down, these alleged agents were the prime suspects. The Saudi authorities were kept informed of these suspicions but chose to do nothing.

Refugees also complained that a number of convicts were living in these camps. These convicts were inmates of Iraqi prisons who during the uprising were freed by the rebels or escaped after their jailers abandoned their posts and went into hiding. Some of them were hardened criminals convicted of serious crimes. Refugees also blame them for the looting and other criminal activities reported during the uprising. When the uprising was crushed, they sought asylum with the international forces. The following incident was reported as an example of the violent acts perpetrated by these criminals:

There was a violent clash between a number of refugees in one of the camps. Knives were used and few persons were wounded. Later, a gang of them armed with machetes ambushed one of their opponents in a toilet and chopped off his arm.

The refugee who related this incident went on to analyze its repercussions on relations between Iraqi refugees and their Saudi hosts:

[The Saudis] were shocked and baffled by such behavior. Their attitude toward us also changed. At the beginning they sympathized with us as we shared a common cause, i.e. opposing the Iraqi regime, but later these sympathies almost disappeared.

The presence of few homosexuals among the refugees embarrassed them immensely. Homosexuality contradicts religious teachings and undermines the image of masculinity and devotion to religious principles and Islamic ethical standards that traditional people aspire to project. The high value put on having a good reputation often compels traditional people to deny or hide socially unacceptable behavior but “Fifi” proved to be the exception as the following account showed:

One day a group of armed Saudi soldiers stormed our bachelors’ camp. They went from one tent to another, shouting and shoving us to come out. We finally managed to learn from one of them the reason for the search and their rough behavior. He told us that they were looking for a woman reportedly hiding in our camp. The allegation surprised us and we would have laughed at the suggestion except our guards looked serious. Our camp was for bachelors only, and we hadn’t seen a woman for months. But they refused to believe us. They said they had

evidence to support their claim. It turned out the evidence was a brassier seen hanging on a clothesline in the camp. A homosexual [drag queen], known by the nickname Fifi, admitted that the article of underwear was his. The soldiers apprehended him and took him out with them...

Eventually, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the camp weighed down on the already depressed refugees. Some of them despaired of ever leaving the camps. Anxiety over the fate of their beloved ones left behind in Iraq nagged at their minds. Few of them decided to go back to Iraq and face the possible dire retributions of the Iraqi regime rather than endure the dull and depressing confinement in the refugee camps. A number of them returned and they had to plead with the Saudis to allow them back. These lucky refugees told them of the savage torture and execution to which returnees were subjected to by the Iraqi security police.

It is not difficult to imagine the desperate situation in which those refugees found themselves. No sign of an immediate political change in Iraq was looming in the horizon and hope of going back soon to their home country had all but vanished. A change in the Saudi government position on refusing to grant them permanent refugee status was also unexpected.

Despair can sometimes lead to violence and it was this mood that moved the Iraqis to take up arms against the Ba'th regime. According to refugees who were in these camps at that time, the general mood of the Iraqi refugees in these camps was also characterized as desperate. A hopeless person may become violent for the slightest provocation.

Riots are not usually planned and often begin with a minor incident which then develops into a wider and bigger confrontation. This was also the case in the refugee riot: It began with an altercation between a Saudi doctor at the camp clinic and an Iraqi patient. The Saudis sent a number of soldiers, known as the red berets, to arrest the Iraqi refugee involved. The appearance of these troops inside the camp aroused the curiosity of some Iraqi refugees. After learning of the purpose of their mission, a number of them tried to dissuade them from arresting their fellow refugee. A confrontation between the two sides ensued. The soldiers who insisted on following their orders were then pushed and shoved toward the camp's gate. The soldiers retaliated by opening fire with live ammunition into the crowd. The panic-stricken

refugees dispersed leaving behind them one fallen refugee dying or already dead from a bullet wound to his head.

Iraqi refugees became furious. The soldiers found themselves facing a full-scale riot. The refugees were unarmed but they were hurling bottles and other missiles on the Saudi soldiers. The soldiers retaliated by opening fire at them. When the riot ended, the death toll stood at nine Iraqi refugees .

Most of the refugees in the Saudi camps were later granted asylum in Western countries, Syria and Iran. However, more than six thousands of them were still living in these camps when the US and its allies invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam's regime in 2003. These refugees had by then spent more than a decade in these camps.

In a letter sent by a number of refugees in these camps before the invasion, they described living conditions in these camps as intolerable. The letter also mentioned several complaints which are similar to those raised by refugees who had lived in these camps almost a decade earlier. The picture they drew of conditions in these camps is saddening. The small camp area, surrounded on all sides by high fences topped with barbed wire, is blamed for the high incident of health problems among refugees. Many refugees were reported to be suffering from psychological problems such as schizophrenia and depression. Confinement and isolation from the rest of the world were believed to be behind the relatively high number of cases of suicides and attempted suicides. The letter also reflected the mood of despair and helplessness felt by refugees. Many repeated that their lives came to a halt and there is no prospect of leaving the camp to finish their education, find jobs, meet with their relatives, get married and have children. Children living in the camp were also suffering, and according to the letter their knowledge and experience of the outside world have been limited to what they read about it in books. Consequently, these children "cannot distinguish animals apart or identify pets." After describing the efforts of United Nations' representatives as inadequate and ineffective, they accused the entire world of abandoning them.

Chapter Three: Homing Pigeons and Asylum Seekers

Iraqi refugees left their country as a last, desperate measure dictated by political oppression or worsening economic conditions. Many of them hoped for a speedy overthrow of the ruling regime allowing them a safe return to their country. When this did not happen, they had to seriously consider the painful possibility of a long stay in exile. Returning to Iraq was one of the options open to them but it was the least reasonable because of the serious risks involved. Many of the early refugees and exiles chose to settle down in Syria or Iran because of cultural and religious factors or simply because these were the only two countries that accepted Iraqi dissidents and refugees before the second Gulf war. After that war ended, more of these refugees began to apply for refugee status in Western countries either because it was the only option available to them, as in the case of refugees in Saudi Arabia, or due to the economic and other advantages involved. This chapter presents stories of Iraqis who chose these different options.

The return of homing pigeons

Many refugees fled Iraq to avoid official retaliation for taking part in the insurrection of 1991. After the creation of the protected zone in the north, Kurdish refugees went back to their towns and villages. Since a similar zone was not established in the south, the Shias of southern Iraq who had sought refuge mainly in Iran and Saudi Arabia could not return safely. However, few of them chose to go back in spite of the obvious dangers awaiting them. They acted much the same way as homing pigeons do, driven more by instincts rather than reason.

Iraqis love pigeons. Pigeons are rarely hunted or eaten by them, except occasionally by hungry children in rural areas. Traditional people regard eating pigeons that live in shrines and mosques to be almost sacrilegious because these are considered *dakheels* or refugees under the protection of Allah or the holy men buried in these shrines. Many old and young men in cities as well as rural areas own large flocks of them. A section in every livestock market in an Iraqi city or town is reserved for selling and buying pigeons. There is always a demand for pigeons and a pigeon of good stock and beautiful plumes can fetch a high price. *Al-mutair'chee*, literally meaning the flyer, is the

traditional name given to a pigeon owner. Iraqis traditionally suspects him of being a habitual liar because if a pigeon strays from its original owner and join his flock he would usually deny it. This is why his testimony was at one time inadmissible in courts of law. He was also considered an unsuitable husband because he spent a lot of time on rooftops tending or flying his pigeons. During this time, he could spy on the daughters of his neighbors while they were hanging their laundry to dry or going about their daily chores in their house dresses. The actual reason for his unpopularity among women who arranged marriages may well be his tendency to squander large sums of his money, considerable time and effort on his hobby. The pigeon lovers continue to keep and raise pigeons in spite of the severe social sanctions imposed on them. The most valued trait in these pets is their loyalty and this is why the homing pigeon is the most valued of all.

If Iraqis were asked to name their favorite pets, many of them would probably put the homing pigeon at the top of their lists. In poems and songs, a faithful lover is frequently compared to a homing pigeon that never strays from his or her nest. While Egyptians are fond of repeating that whomever drinks from the Nile would return to Egypt, Iraqis think of themselves as homing pigeons and of Iraq as their only nest. This is why some of the refugees went back to Iraq regardless of the serious dangers in store for them.

Hussain Kamil was one of the Iraqi refugees who decided to go back. Kamil was Saddam Hussain's son-in-law and a senior official in the military and party establishment that supported the regime. His defection, which received worldwide attention, was hailed by many Iraqi dissidents and refugees as a strong sign of the weakness of the regime and a harbinger of its imminent downfall. Kamil gave several news conferences and interviews in which he called for the overthrow of the Ba'th regime. After spending few months in Jordan, Kamil abruptly decided to return to Iraq. Soon after, he and several members of his family were brutally murdered.

Iraqi refugees were baffled by the news of Kamil's decision to return as much as they were surprised and amused by his defection. Refusing to believe official statements on this incident, they speculated on the real motive behind his inexplicable and foolish conduct. None of them expressed any regret over his fate since he was held responsible for many atrocities. A story circulating among refugees pictured Hussain Kamil at the head of the Presidential Guard units, which attacked rebels inside the shrine of Imam Hussain, the Prophet's

grandson and third Imam of the Shias. Kamil, a Sunni like his father-in-law, reportedly ordered shelling the sacred shrine to eliminate the last remaining pockets of resistance inside it. After that, he allegedly stood at the gate of the shrine and shouted defiantly: "You are Hussain and I am Hussain but I am more powerful." Shia refugees who repeated this story boasted that at the end their Imam emerged triumphant in this mock confrontation. Many of them also hoped that the brutal liquidation of Kamil and his associates would be the beginning of a large purge that would further weaken the regime's hold on power and hasten its downfall.

Hussain Kamil was one of several prominent civil and military officials of the regime who defected after the second Gulf war. Many observers, including Iraqi refugees, saw this as a manifestation of the erosion of the regime's power base. This is why news of the return of one prominent dissident to Iraq stunned Iraqi refugees especially those in Syria where he had lived for almost two decades. They were disappointed and angry with him for appearing on Iraqi television and criticizing Iraqi opposition groups. According to them, his conduct showed inexcusable lack of gratitude to his Syrian hosts who trusted him, assigned him a senior position and showered him with numerous benefits and privileges. Their attempts to come up with a possible justification for his action were fruitless. He apparently did not have financial or other personal problems, which may have forced him to take the desperate choice of returning to an uncertain, and most probably disagreeable, future in Iraq. "If he did not like it here," one refugee bitterly commented, "he could have gone to a European country or anywhere else except Iraq." These refugees who had endured more severe living conditions outside their country saw his return as an act of treason. They were not surprised to learn that he was either in jail or under house arrest and expressed no further concern or sympathy for his fate.

In comparison, the reason behind the return of a young Iraqi refugee from Syria was no mystery to other refugees. His father convinced him to go to Syria to avoid military conscription. He put him with friends in Syria who looked after him, found him a job and did their best to make his stay as comfortable as possible. However, the young man who was in his late teens and had never before left his family became hopelessly homesick. His father's friends tried to persuade him to stay but he finally had his wish and left home.

Iraqi refugees in Saudi Arabia also had a choice between staying in the camps and returning to Iraq. The decisive factor in this choice, according to some of them, was the individual's willpower and perseverance in the face of extreme hardship. Refugees who had more patience endured the harsh life in the camp and the heavy emotional burden of separation from their loved ones and homes. These refugees who patiently languished there for more than a decade were eventually granted refugee status in other countries. Few restless refugees could no longer bear the confinement and homesickness and decided to go back to Iraq. Some of them had to leave again to avoid imprisonment or execution.

One report recorded the fate of a number of refugees who were driven by despair to return. They were purportedly imprisoned, tortured and then released. Sometime later, they suffered hair loss and other symptoms before dying. It is the general consensus among Iraqi refugees that they, like several other refugees and dissidents, were the victims of poisoning with Thallium by the Iraqi security forces.

Staying with the neighbors: Iran

Many Iraqi refugees went to Iran and Syria and in fewer numbers to Turkey and Jordan. Various reasons led them to make one of these countries bordering Iraq their temporary home until a political change in Iraq would allow them to return safely. Many of them settled down, learned the native language, if other than Arabic, adapted to local customs, finished their studies and found employment or established their own businesses. Most of them also sought to preserve their national, religious and linguistic identity.

It is estimated that four hundred thousand Iraqis made Iran their second home. The vast majority of them lived there since the early 1980s when the Ba'th regime drove them out of their country. After accommodating them temporarily in refugee camps, the Iranian government allowed them to freely reside in Iranian cities, enroll their children in Iranian schools, own properties, and seek employment. Most of them took advantage of these privileges and managed to rebuild their lives. A small minority, who could not adjust to life in Iran, chose to leave for Syria or elsewhere.

The stories collected from refugees who are living in Iran or previously lived there documented their efforts to overcome their personal feelings of shock and loss and to deal with the enormous challenge of adapting to a new social environment. Although Iraq at that time was in a state of war and all young and middle-aged males faced military conscription and the possibility of a violent death, Iraqis who were expelled to Iran did not see in their banishment any blessing in disguise and regarded it as a catastrophic loss. It left them bitter, resentful and sad. They were born and raised in Iraq and came to recognize it, and rightfully so, as their own country and homeland. It never crossed their minds before the beginning of the expulsion campaigns that they will be forcefully expelled from it and had to live elsewhere. The banishment of these ordinary people whom many of them had no political affiliations brought their normal lives to an abrupt standstill. They had to abandon without prior notice or compensation their homes, businesses and careers. The education of their children was discontinued and their scholastic records were left behind. They were also separated from relatives, friends and neighbors. One of them fondly remembered his tearful neighbors coming out of their homes to bid them farewell, and their women wailing to express sadness at their departure and to share in their sorrows. The stories of these refugees would therefore be incomplete without describing some of the disruptive effects the expulsion had on their lives and especially the lingering emotional trauma.

Some of those threatened with expulsion tried desperately to have their expulsion orders revoked or at least postponed. A married man in his fifties who was employed as a driver in a government agency was informed beforehand that expulsion orders for all members of his family have already been issued. He refused to accept this as a fait accompli and decided to try everything possible to have these orders revoked. He desperately pleaded with party members working with him and in his neighborhood to intercede on his behalf with the security agency responsible for the deportation. He made every effort to proclaim his strong nationalistic feelings and loyalty to the ruling party and its leadership. In political rallies organized by his employer he was frequently seen hanging banners and signs and shouting at the top of his voice slogans praising the Ba'th party, and Saddam Hussain and strongly denouncing the Iranian leadership and people. These were tense and difficult times for his family. They were all anxiously awaiting a decision on their fate when his father suddenly died. It was a severe

emotional and financial blow to the family. He had to borrow money from friends and colleagues to pay for his father's funeral. Soon after he and all members of his family were deported.

The Iraqi government did its best to make the expulsion to Iran most difficult for the refugees. The timing could not be worse; most of the expulsions occurred in the first months of the war with Iran. The refugees were taken in lorries to the borders and told to cross on foot the rough terrain to the other side. They were mostly old men, women and children. Military operations were taking place not far from these crossing points and the possibility of wandering into a field mine could not be ruled out.

Crossing the borders in a wheelchair

One of stories of the deported refugees detailed the ordeal of a physically handicapped refugee. The man who was in his early forties worked as a legal assistant in a small southern town. Everyone in his town admired his courage and determination in the face of extremely adverse circumstances.

"Anyone else with his disability would have stayed at home all the time," my informant told me, "wallowing in self-pity and hating the whole world, but not him."

The man suffered from diabetes and its complications necessitated the amputation of both of his legs. A short time after and to the amazement of all, he reported to work in a wheelchair. Everyone was happy for him when they heard that he won a large prize in the national lottery. They said that no amount of money could compensate him for the loss of his legs but his winnings would help to make life easier for him. One morning, security agents came and took him away. His disability obviously did not qualify him in the eyes of the Iraqi authorities for special consideration and he was deported to the Iranian borders. My informant who was not present at the scene speculated at length on how the crossing must have been doubly exhausting for him. Shortly after reaching Iran, the man died. The people in his southern town still remember him as a friend and a neighbor whose courage was exemplary.

A new life in Iran

After arriving in Iran, the exiles discovered that the Iraqi authorities had detained many of their male relatives of military age in special concentration camps in fear that they upon reaching Iran might fight alongside their Iranian foes. The sudden separation from family members and the uncertainty regarding their fate further distressed the refugees.

The refugees arrived without money, identity papers or educational and job experience certificates. They had to literally rebuild their lives again. They were grateful to the Iranian government for admitting them and not suspecting them of being potential spies and saboteurs sent by the Iraqis. Some of them hoped that their expulsion was a temporary measure and eventually the Iraqi government would allow them back. These hopes were kept alive by the Iranian government's attempts to stir up world interest in their cause. When these attempts failed to produce any result and the war dragged on, the refugees began to lose hope in a prompt return. One of them, however, did not give up and was willing to go to any length to secure his return to Iraq. A common acquaintance told me that he wrote a letter to Saddam Hussain vowing to donate all his fortune to the Iraqi government and the war effort if only he would rescind his deportation order. According to my informant, Saddam approved his request and the previously-wealthy man returned to Iraq penniless.

Adjustment to living conditions in Iran required a tremendous effort from these refugees. They needed first to communicate with their hosts. This was not a pressing problem in the refugee camps because of the presence of translators. The language barrier was experienced as a major problem after they were allowed to leave the camps and settle down in Iranian cities and towns. Most of them knew only few words of Farsi. More urgently, their children must learn the language in order to continue their education in Iranian schools which taught in Farsi only.

The language barrier was not the only obstacle facing the refugees in their attempts to adapt to their host's culture. Obviously, these refugees and their hosts had many things in common. The strongest common denominator was being Muslim Shias. Every Iraqi Shia knew about the shrine of Imam al-Ridha in Iran and it is one of the most cherished dreams of Iranian Shias to visit the religious shrines in Karbala, Baghdad, Samara and al-Najaf. Al-Najaf in southern Iraq is

traditionally the principal Shia center of religious scholarship in the world. Students from Iran and other countries usually spend several years of residency in one of its *hawzas* or religious schools to study their religion. After graduation, many Iranian scholars decide to stay in these centers of learning to teach and conduct research. *Mujtahedeen* or supreme religious authorities and leading *ulemas*, i.e. religious scholars, are usually either Iraqis or Iranians. Ayatollah al-Khoi, the late supreme authority, was an Iranian but he made his residence in Iraq. He was not deported because he refrained from political activities and devoted all his time to religious duties. His deportation would have also resulted in the relocation of religious learning and leadership among the Shias to another country, probably Iran.

Before the war, Iranians and Iraqis crossed their common borders to perform pilgrimage to shrines located in both countries. These frequent and regular contacts resulted in greater awareness on both sides of the traditions, customs and habits of each other. Intermarriages between them were common in Iraqi cities like al-Najaf and Karbala. A number of Farsi words entered the Iraqi dialect, and the palates of many Iraqis developed a taste for Iranian cuisine.

Another sentiment shared by the Iraqi refugees and their Iranian hosts was their deep hatred for the Iraqi regime and its leadership. The resentment of some refugees was clearly reflected in their readiness to join the Iranian forces fighting the Iraqi army. The Iranians looked upon the Iraqi refugees as victims of their government draconian policies and sympathized with their plight. Iranian religious leaders encouraged their followers to treat these refugees with compassion and to provide them with all help due to fellow Muslims in distress. These assurances did serve to allay some of the refugees' anxieties. However, their position was made difficult by the continuation of the war with Iraq. They had shared the same national identity as the Iraqi forces which were occupying Iranian border cities and killing thousands of Iranian young men. What the refugees feared most was ordinary Iranians' branding them as *ahal al-Kuffa*, i.e. the people of al-Kuffa.

Al-Kuffa is a small Shia town in southern Iraq, located few miles away from al-Najaf. Early Muslims established the town after occupying Iraq and Persia. Imam Ali, the first Shia imam, made it his capital. The strong support, which the people of the town initially gave to their Imam, subsequently subsided and their resolve to defend their town and leader all but disappeared. Some of its tribal chieftains and their followers even accepted bribes from the main contender to Imam

Ali's position as caliphate in exchange for switching their loyalty to him. As a result of this, the Imam was assassinated and his rival illegally succeeded him as caliph or leader of the Muslims. Few years later, the people of al-Kuffa wrote to Imam Hussain, Imam Ali's son and the Prophet's grandson, asking him to lead them against another usurper of the caliphate. Their letters to him carried pledges of loyalty from tens of thousands of them. After reaching a place near the city, the Imam discovered that the vast majority of its population, including all but few of those who swore allegiance to him, had been coerced or cajoled into joining the army that was sent to fight him. In the dramatic battle that ensued, the Imam and all of his family members and few companions accompanying him were killed and beheaded. The martyrdom of Imam Hussain is passionately remembered by Shias everywhere who are also reminded of the treachery and cowardice of the people of al-Kuffa at that time.

Among Iraqi Shias, it is a gross insult to accuse someone of thinking or behaving like the people of al-Kuffa. Uninformed non-Iraqi Shias often do not distinguish between the accursed original people of the city and their descendants, the present-day Shias of southern Iraq. This inappropriate stereotyping was given some credence by the fact that the majority of soldiers in the Iraqi army were Shias. Recently, an article in a religious journal published by Canadian Shias of Lebanese origin advised their readers not to condemn contemporary Iraqis for the sins of their forefathers.

The refugee's first and foremost concern was earning an income to financially support themselves and their dependents. The Iranian government at that time was engaged in a costly war with Iraq which exhausted all its available financial resources. Its income from exporting oil and other mineral resources reached a very low level after Iraqi war planes bombed and disabled its refineries, oil pumping stations, oil exporting terminals and major ports. Concurrently, the trade and economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the government of the United States in the wake of the hostage crisis negatively impacted its economy. In addition to hosting Iraqi refugees, Iran was flooded by millions of Afghani refugees fleeing the war between the mujahedeen rebels and the forces of the leftist Afghani government and its Russian allies.

Refugees were eager to point out that the economic situation in Iran made it difficult for them to find gainful employment or other means of livelihood. University graduates among them despaired of finding

employment in view of the high unemployment rate. The demand for skilled workers had also declined after shortages in imported machinery and other capital goods forced many factories and workshops to close down. Merchants and businessmen among them may have the knowledge and skills to run a successful business but they lacked the funds and contacts to make this possible.

There was of course the option of living on charity. Their pride would have certainly stopped many of accepting charity and enduring the humiliation and loss of status resulting from it. Even if some of them justified this to themselves and their families as a necessity, charitable assistance provided only some of their basic needs. Iraqi dissidents and religious scholars residing in Iran offered them some support, but the urgent needs of the refugees by far exceeded the resources of these people. Consequently, most of the refugees had to rely on their abilities, skills and meager means to support themselves. Most of those who went through this experience or observed it at close range described it as an overwhelming struggle.

This struggle for survival involved making sacrifices and adjustments, which were difficult and painful. Young men who were planning to continue their studies in the sciences or arts before their expulsion were content to study religion in one of the traditional religious schools. Many of them undoubtedly did this out of convictions but some were probably attracted by the grants awarded to seminary students. Engineers, professionals and others who used to work in white-collared jobs in Iraq considered themselves fortunate to find semi-skilled work such as taxi drivers. Merchants and shopkeepers, some of whom used to own major stores and lucrative commercial businesses in the prestigious *Shurja* bazaar in Baghdad, had to work as peddlers in the street of Tehran. Indeed, many Iraqi refugees became skilled traveling salesmen.

Iraqi refugees differ in evaluating the hospitality of the Iranian government and people toward them. Refugees still living in Iran generally praised their hosts. In contrast, refugees who left Iran and settled elsewhere usually expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment received by refugees. Apparently, Iraqi refugees expected more than what their Iranian hosts were able or willing to offer them. They argued that Islamic ideals and values to which the Islamic government is morally and legally committed obliged it to accord them the same rights and privileges given to its citizens. These refugees labeled anything short of this as non-Islamic discrimination and blamed it on latent

Iranian ethnocentrism. Some of the complaints frequently mentioned by these refugees were the restrictions on enrolling their children in universities and on obtaining Iranian passports and travel documents. Some Iraqi refugees had to go to Syria to complete their university education. While many Iraqis were granted passports and travel documents, the procedure can be complicated and lengthy. One refugee complained that a fellow refugee who became seriously ill and wanted to travel abroad for medical treatment had to wait for a long time before obtaining a passport. Even a refugee who enjoyed preferential treatment, appointed to a prestigious position in a religious establishment, owned an apartment in Tehran and managed to have his cousin freed from a prison of war camp bitterly complained of the delay in issuing one of his sons an Iranian passport. Consequently, he had to postpone his travel with his family to Beirut to assume responsibility for an Iranian-sponsored publishing house. Not all Iraqi refugees were pampered or ungrateful to their host as him.

A refugee who did not enjoy any political rights or freedom in Iraq reviled the Iranian government for not allowing refugees to speak freely and expecting them to toe the official line. However, another refugee dismissed this as untrue and pointed out that Iraqis enjoyed more freedom in Iran than in their home country. He had the following harsh remarks on Iraqi young men in Iran:

You know what was the favorite pastime for young Iraqi refugees in Iran? If you pass by some girls high school at the end of a school day you will find a flock of them waiting for the girls to come out so that they can accost and harass them on their way home while the fathers and brothers of these same girls were probably at the fronts defending their country against Iraqi aggression. Moreover, some Iraqi refugees were even heard cursing Imam Khomeini in public and yet were not imprisoned or sent back.

Some Iranian politicians at the time called on their government to deny Iraqi refugees living in Iran certain privileges. One leading politician was even quoted as describing the Iraqi refugees as "parasites." What made these statements more ominous was their timing which coincided with a thaw in relations with the Iraqi regime following the second Gulf war. While some privileges may be withdrawn from Iraqi refugees, driving them out of Iran would be a flagrant breach of Islamic principles and values, and the Islamic republic would stand to lose much by taking such a drastic measure.

Nevertheless, these statements and political developments in the area resulted in panic among refugees. Many of them apprehensive about their future in Iran decided to leave the country.

Living with neighbors: Syria

Syria was a favorite destination among Iraqi dissidents who fled their country in the 1970s. It also became a safe haven for many thousands of them in the following two decades. Large proportions of them were refugees expelled to Iran at first but later chose to go to Syria. After the second Gulf war, Syria became a temporary stop for many Iraqis seeking asylum in other countries in Europe, North America or in Australia.

Like other countries hosting Iraqi refugees, Syria presented them with a number of pull and push factors. One of the factors that attracted refugees to Syria was that entry visas were not required from Arabs. They were also allowed to reside anywhere in the country without obtaining residency permits. Syrian laws also entitled them to own real estate property, establish businesses and enroll their children in public schools and universities. Another major factor that made Syria attractive to many Iraqis was its traditional Arab customs and values which are almost identical to those of the Iraqis. As mentioned earlier, the shrine of al-Saida in Syria has religious significance for Iraqi Shias. The secular regime in Syria and the presence of a large Christian minority may have encouraged Christian Iraqi refugees as well to go there. Furthermore, the cost of living in Syria was and remains one of the lowest in the Middle East which made it more attractive to refugees with limited means. Iraqi refugees also felt relatively safe in Syria because a faction of the Ba'th party opposed to the Iraqi government rules the country. The Syrian government publicly condemned Iraq's war against Iran and its occupation of Kuwait. Several Iraqi opposition groups had offices in Damascus, published newspapers and conducted meetings and organize rallies opposed to the Iraqi regime.

On the disadvantage side, the chronic recession plaguing the Syrian economy made it difficult for Iraqi refugees to earn a decent living there. Given the large number of unemployed Syrian graduates and the overstaffed bureaucracy, employment opportunities for educated Iraqi refugees and exiles in Syria were very few. Since the middle of the 1980s, some restrictions on the entry of Iraqis into Syria were

imposed. Henceforth, Iraqis were required to obtain a special permit, commonly known as a 'telegram', from the Syrian security administration allowing them to enter Syria. These measures were introduced after agents of the Iraqi regime were accused of responsibility for a number of explosions that resulted in scores of dead and wounded Syrians. After the second Gulf war, Iraqi refugees were worried over the implications of a rapprochement between the Iraqi and Syria governments. They feared losing some of their privileges and being targeted by Iraqi security agents. In spite of these anxieties, several thousand Iraqis continued to live in Syria.

Living in the West: The final destination?

Many Iraqis became refugees in European countries, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent wide publicity given to the oppressive nature of its ruling regime resulted in a change of policy in Western countries toward Iraqis seeking asylum. Before that, most of these countries sided with Iraq in its war with Iran, ignored its flagrant violations of human rights and international charters and repeated use of chemical weapons and refused to support or at least sympathize with the causes of Iraqi dissidents and refugees. At that time, Iraqi refugees usually headed to the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway because of their liberal refugee laws and regulations and generous treatment of refugees. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait convinced more countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to look more favorably on asylum applications by Iraqis.

Financial gains and long-term security were the two most important benefits which make Western countries attractive to Iraqi refugees. The social security payments given to refugee in most of these countries are very generous compared to income and living standards in Iraq and its neighbors. For Iraqi refugees who were unable to find employment and support themselves and their families, an asylum in one of these countries was viewed as a virtual end to their persistent financial worries. Such benefits were not available to refugees in Iran and Syria.

Living in a Western country also satisfied these refugees' security needs. Most Iraqis lived in abject fear of the Iraqi government and its

wide network of spies and security agents. Before their expulsion or flight from Iraq, they like other discontented Iraqis, took extreme precautions to avoid becoming suspected of anti-regime sentiments or activities. Any observer who does not know all the facts about the oppressive nature of the regime and the impact of its reign of terror on the psychology of the population would think that Iraqis suffered from acute paranoia. The specter of the regime apparently followed these terrified Iraqis everywhere. Refugees were unable to rid themselves of these fears even after spending many years abroad. They regarded with suspicion newcomers and generally refrained from interacting with them or expressing their opinions in front of them until they were assured of their opposition to the regime. Secret agents of the Iraqi government were thought to be lurking in every organized group or meeting of Iraqi refugees. These suspicions were exploited by some unscrupulous refugees to accuse their rivals of being agents of the Iraqi regime either to discredit them or to bring retributions on them from the security agencies of host countries. Two refugees reported that they became the victims of these unfounded allegations. One of them was subjected to an interrogation by the security agency of the country where he lived at that time. Both of them eventually left these countries and settled down in Western countries.

Refugees in general, and those living in neighboring countries in particular, worried about reports written by these unknown agents on their alleged or real opposition activities. They not only feared for their personal safety but also for members of their families remaining in Iraq. These fears explained their insistence on refusing to reveal their true identities and names to Iraqis unknown to them. Instead, they regularly used aliases or noms de guerre. More likely than not, a refugee whose elder son's name is Haider would introduce himself to a stranger as Abou Haidar, which literally translates as 'the father of Haidar.' Iraqis traditionally use these aliases rather than proper names in addressing each other out of respect but are expected to give their full names in introducing themselves to strangers. Whenever a group of Iraqi refugees met together, it is likely to include more than one person having the same alias. One refugee told me that he was so infuriated by this precaution among fellow refugees that he once refused to shake the hands of another Iraqi unless he told him his full name. It is interesting to note that this same refugee also used an alias.

Such anxieties, which were exhibited more by Iraqis living in countries bordering Iraq, were not entirely unjustified. Iraqis residing in

Iran witnessed the terrifying and devastating long arm of the Iraqi regime almost daily in the 1980s when Iraqi warplanes and long-range missiles bombarded Iranian cities. Iraqi agents were also accused of conducting sabotage operations against official and civilian targets in both Iran and Syria. In mid 1990s, a prominent Iraqi dissident was assassinated in Lebanon. The use of Thallium by Iraqi agents to poison and kill Iraqi dissidents led many refugees to refrain from eating or drinking in unsafe restaurants or in the company of suspicious persons. This convinced refugees that the farther you live from Iraq, the more secure you were.

Countries bordering Iraq did not offer Iraqi refugees the option of naturalization after a stipulated period of residency. This was critically important for Iraqis who were rendered stateless by the Iraqi government's confiscation of their nationality and identity papers or the refusal of its embassies to renew their expired passports. One refugee recalled how some refugees who were originally evicted to Iran and went to Syria afterward used to congregate in front of the Iraqi embassy in Damascus to demand, "and some of them to beg for ", the return of their passports. Without passports, they were unable to seek employment in other countries such as the oil-rich Gulf states. Refugees living in countries bordering Iraq also saw no future for their children in these countries. In contrast, obtaining a refugee status in Canada, the United States or a European country would make it possible for them to continue their studies and find gainful employment after graduation.

Refugees who were seeking or had already obtained asylum in a Western country were anxious to defend this decision. They wanted to convince everyone that obtaining the financial benefits associated with a refugee status was not their major objective. If given a real choice, they asserted, they would certainly prefer to live and raise their families in an Arab or Muslim country. According to their reasoning, choosing to live in Western countries was not their fault but the direct result of the policies of most Arab countries.

"If only this or that Gulf country treated us like the Indian and Sri Lankan nationals whom they employ as domestics and gave us entry visas and work permits," they argued, " then we would not even think of going to Denmark, Sweden, the United States or Canada." In support of this claim, an Iraqi refugee alleged that a relative who wanted to obtain an entry visa for him to an Arab country was told by one of its immigration officials that "it would be easier for an Israeli to

get a residence permit than an Iraqi refugee.” And although this refugee strongly disapproved of the few refugees who sought asylum in Israel, he tried painstakingly to justify it:

The Arabs did not receive us with open arms. They put us in camps like prisoners. Some of us became beggars, and a number of Iraqi women have been driven to prostitution. Iraqis who have always been hospitable to Arabs deserved better than this. These Iraqis risked death by crossing the borders into Israel and ended up prisoners in Israeli jails. Why? Because they were desperate. Can anyone then blame Iraqis for preferring the hospitality of the Swedes, Danes or Australians?

Refugees who chose to go to Western countries were confident of their ability to resist the undesirable cultural influences of their host societies. Other refugees who rejected this option disagreed and maintained instead that some acculturation is inevitable. The latter believed that the opportunity to raise their children in accordance with their traditional and religious values in Iran or Syria made the financial hardship and occasional official harassment suffered by them in these countries tolerable. They were mostly married men with children who feared that life in a Western country would expose their dependents to its unacceptable and corrupting influences. Their primary worry was that their children would exchange their Islamic and traditional values and customs for the Western way of life and its abhorrent sexual freedom. They were horrified by stories of Iraqi teenagers drinking alcohol or taking drugs in public places, of girls who were previously chaste and shy keeping boyfriends and of men abandoning their religion and getting married in churches. One of these refugees living in Syria repeatedly refused his brother's offer to arrange for him and his family to join him in Norway. He told me that his brother, who was supporting them financially, understood his wish to have his children raised in a Muslim country where they could learn their religious duties and values. As a short-term solution for his financial problems, he was planning to travel to Libya to look for employment and leave his wife and children in Syria.

Obtaining asylum in a Western country

There were generally two methods for getting an asylum in a Western country, a lawful and unlawful one. In the lawful method, a

refugee applied for refugee status to the embassy of the chosen country or through the offices of the United Nations. In the second unlawful method, the refugee traveled to the country of choice without proper documents and visas and applied for asylum upon arrival. Refugees preferred the first method because it is legal, cheaper and did not involve any risks of detention or repatriation. However, many of them opted for the unofficial route because it was faster and more likely to be effective. Desperate refugees were prepared to act outside the laws by using forged documents and visas, destruction of passports before at arrival, falsification of documents and providing incorrect or incomplete information to immigration officials. The cost of using the second method was frequently high for most refugees and included travel expenses, payments for forged documents and bribes to immigration and airline officials. There was also the risk of being turned back by the immigration authorities in one of the transit countries or by the destination country.

Gaining refugee status by legitimate means

There are three ways of obtaining asylum in a North American or European country: applying to the embassy of the country concerned, selection by the immigration teams sent to interview and process refugees in camps, or registration as a refugee with a representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Iraqi refugees attempted all of these methods with varying degrees of success.

Western embassies in Syria and other countries bordering Iraq occasionally accepted applications for refugee status. According to Iraqi refugees who tried this method, their applications were often given a cursory review and rejected. The usual justification for rejection was failure to satisfy eligibility conditions. Refugees whose applications were unsuccessful accused local embassy officials of being unsympathetic toward refugees in general.

After the second Gulf war, the governments of the United States, Canada and some European countries began to send teams of immigration officials to refugee camps, especially those located in Saudi Arabia, to collect applications and conduct interviews with

applicants. Refugees living in these camps saw in this as their only opportunity to escape the dreary and hopeless camp life.

According to refugees who were in these camps, the arrival of immigration teams was one of the rare events celebrated by all refugees. Hopes were revived and a mood of cautious optimism pervaded the camps. Everyone prayed that it would be his turn this time. The American team came first, conducted interviews with a number of refugees then left. Soon after, similar delegations from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and other European countries followed suit. They informed refugees that the final decision on their applications would be made after the medical check-ups. Refugees waited impatiently for results. Finally, the list of approved refugees came, and those who found their names on it were elated.

Applying for asylum: The story of Amjad and his friends

Amjad was one of the refugees scheduled for interviews with the Norwegian team. He and other refugees said that they spent sleepless nights before their interviews wondering about the questions they would be asked. They spent many hours preparing for these interviews and lost more hours of sleep worrying about their outcomes. The experience reminded them of the nights before final examinations at school. They were told that an interpreter would be present during interviews to translate questions and answers. Someone suggested offering the interpreter a bribe to win his support and sympathy. They, Amjad and his friends, met together to discuss the idea and agree on the amount of the bribe. One of them said that the interpreter who must be paid handsomely would probably expect or demand a substantial sum of money. They then considered ways of raising the amount. After adding up all their savings from their refugee welfare pays, they discovered that the sum may not be sufficient and decided to borrow from fellow refugees. Then one of them said: what if the man turns out to be honest, refuse to accept our bribe and report us to his Norwegian superiors. After much deliberation they finally agreed that it would be safer to abandon the idea and put their trust in Allah.

Their worries about the interviews were proven groundless. All the interviewers wanted to know about them were few biographical data such as their names, birth dates, birthplaces, marital status etc. The

only problem encountered in these interviews was reaching an agreement among interviewers, interpreters and refugees on the correct spellings of proper names.

Rejection of their applications was unthinkable to them because it meant a longer stay in the camp. Someone speculated that since the interviewers did not ask them about their political or personal beliefs, they would probably obtain such information from other sources such as the camp administration. Like most Iraqis living inside or outside their country, they were unable to rid themselves of the mindset of the persecuted citizen living under an authoritarian, oppressive regime. Accordingly, many believed that the camp administration was routinely spying on them and keeping a secret file on each refugee. These speculations provided more fuel for their worries. They also considered the possibility that European governments may not approve of refugees with strong political beliefs or may consider a practicing Muslim an unsuitable immigrant. Some tried to assure others and themselves that these suspicions were unfounded because, as everyone knows, these governments, including the Norwegian government, preach and practice religious, political and cultural tolerance.

The list of refugees approved by the Norwegian authority finally arrived and Amjad's name was on it. He was thrilled. After a trip by bus to the Saudi capital, Riyadh, they boarded a plane to Oslo. One of these refugees recalled his feeling upon arrival in Oslo:

I thought this was going to put an end to all my worries. I was wrong. Before that I used to worry about a surprise raid on our camp by Iraqi forces, harassment by the camp guards or about my future in general. After arriving here, I found myself worrying about not being able to adjust to life in Norway. People like us simply cannot stop worrying.

Hegira with the UNHCR

Iraqis residing in neighboring countries could also apply for refugee status through local offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. They were required to apply to the office and sit for an interview. If they met the criteria and conditions set down for refugee status, they were then granted refugee identity cards and registration numbers. Subsequently, the office would contact immigration agencies

in different countries to find one willing to admit them as refugees. Some refugees were relatively well informed about international conventions and laws on refugees. They knew, for example, the conditions which qualify a person to obtain a refugee status. All of them believed that they were entitled to this status but UNHCR officials did not always agree with them. Few of them bitterly accused officials stationed at the Damascus office of being unsympathetic and uncooperative toward them.

Most of these disgruntled refugees are newcomers who arrived in Syria after the second Gulf war and the suppression of the rebellion in the south. The opening of a UNHCR office in Damascus was a significant positive development for Iraqi refugees. Before that, the UNHCR office in Cyprus was responsible for refugees in Syria. Representatives were sent regularly to meet with these refugees who came mainly from Somalia. Apparently, Iraqi refugees in Syria were either excluded from their mandate or were unrecognized by the UNHCR. In 1991, one of these representatives operating from the UN Development Organization offices informed me that she was not aware of the presence of Iraqi refugees in Syria and was not authorized to accept their applications.

Soon after the situation changed drastically. A small office of the UNHCR was opened in al-Malki suburb of Damascus. Every Tuesdays and Wednesdays, a group of people was seen standing on the pavements in front of the office or sitting on the stairs leading to the entrance or under the shady trees in al-Jahiz Garden across the street. Most of them were Iraqis. Their presence became a familiar sight to the Syrian residents of this affluent neighborhood. They usually arrived early in the morning although the sign on the door clearly indicated that office hours for visitors began at 10:00 am. The eyes of these refugees stopped staring at the closed doors only briefly to check the time or to glance at the amorous couples sitting close together on the benches of the public garden. They waited for the local employee to come out carrying application forms or a list of the names of the lucky ones who will be interviewed that day. Only those who have prior appointments for interviews were admitted.

The UNHCR refugee application form is made up of several pages in English. Most applicants required the assistance of a commercial interpreter to fill the form. A translator charged 100 Syrian liras or roughly \$2 per page. A family could subsist for a whole week on the total fee charged for one application. My offer to help half a dozen of

them to fill their applications was readily accepted. It took an average of two hours to fill a single form. They reminded me more than once to put everything in it including irrelevant details about their lives in Iraq.

On that day I came at the request of two of them who said that they may require my help in interpreting for them since they did not trust the official interpreter employed by the office of the UNHCR. They were obviously nervous and highly skeptical of the outcome of their applications especially after they were told that my presence during the interviews was not allowed. I tried to raise their hopes by assuring them that if I were responsible for processing their applications, I would not hesitate to grant them refugee status. But their mood on that morning was hopelessly depressed. They believed that the whole procedure was like a lottery decided by chance rather than merit and that since very few have won the grand prize of a refugee status so far there was little chance of their success. Their mood was reflected in the following statement by one of them:

They do not believe us. They all think that we lie and make up stories. Our houses were burnt. We fled to Saudi Arabia and after that we came here. Our brother was granted asylum in England. You know all these facts but they don't. They want material proof.

Finally, they went inside for their interviews. Each interview lasted for approximately fifteen minutes. The first one came out with a faint, ironic smile on his face. When he came near us, he did not wait for the usual question about how well his interview went and said:

I have no doubt that my application will be rejected. They don't believe us. They asked for evidence of this and evidence of that. What am I supposed to do? Bring him a handful of ashes, put it on the table in front of him and tell him that this was all that was left of my home.

I was disappointed and could not help wondering to myself whether they blamed me for the outcome. They had put all their hopes in these applications and perhaps they were thinking that the UN official rejected them because the answers to the items in these forms were incomplete or unconvincing.

Two years later, one of those applicants told me that their applications were finally approved. They were issued identity cards and were now eligible for refugee assistance. It was the UNHCR office in Beirut which approved their requests. Naturally, he heaped praise on the office and its employees:

The staff there were certainly more understanding. They sympathized with us. They also seem to have more experience in dealing with refugees. Of course, we told other Iraqis about it and many have already applied there.

I finally met an Iraqi refugee who praised the UNHCR office in Damascus. He mentioned the name of one official at the office whom he described as helpful. Until the office approved the applications of his second wife and four children from two previous marriages, his evaluation of the office and its employees was strongly negative and disapproving. Since embassies and UN officials are not always as helpful or sympathetic to their requests and needs as Iraqi refugees would like them to be, many of them opted for the uncertain and sometimes dangerous method of obtaining asylum through illegal means.

Asylum the unlawful way

Iraqi refugees described themselves as law-abiding persons but admitted that desperation led some of them to use unconventional and sometimes illegal means. Those who resorted to these methods did not all agree on labeling them as illegal. They also blamed others and unusual circumstances for driving them to use these methods. Countries bordering Iraq allowed them to reside on their territories but did not offer them refugee status. Many of them were unemployed or seasonably employed and barely earned subsistence wages. Even those among them who were living comfortably were pessimistic about future prospects in these countries. It was the consensus among them that financial worries and an uncertain future led some of them to forge documents, bribe officials and break immigration laws but only as a last resort after their applications for refugee status were turned down by unsympathetic governments and UN officials.

Some Iraqis were obviously willing to go to extremes and risk imprisonment and even death to obtain asylum in a Western country. During the 1990s, these Iraqis created much demand for the services of forgers of official documents and smugglers of refugees in the Middle East. Many of these forgers and smugglers were also Iraqis who saw in this business an opportunity to earn a supplementary income. Their identities are open secrets to many fellow exiles.

Smuggling of refugees to Western countries was done in groups or individually.

In the mid-1990s, a daring mass smuggling operation was organized and carried out by a Kurdish group. The destination of the flight was the United Kingdom which was a preferred country of refuge among Iraqis at the time. After chartering an airplane in Syria, the group invited refugees to buy tickets at two thousand dollars per person. This was a large sum for most of them, but it was considered a bargain because arrangements with airport, passport and security authorities in advance made redundant possession of authentic or forged passports and valid visas. Upon landing at Heathrow airport, passengers claimed refugee status and British immigration was bound by international agreements to admit them pending review of their applications. The operation was a total success but it was never repeated to my knowledge. The British government strongly protested to the Syrian government and a large fine was imposed on the carrier.

Most cases of group smuggling of Iraqis reportedly originated from Turkey and Southeast Asian countries. Smugglers in Turkey usually chartered a boat to take the refugees to the shores of Greece or Italy where they could either stay or travel to another European country of their choice. On more than one occasion this method resulted in disaster and a tragic loss of human life. Smugglers of asylum seekers frequently chartered cargo boats which were unsuitable for ferrying passengers and lacked safety requirements. At least one of these ships sank and many of its Iraqi passengers drowned. To avoid apprehension by immigration and custom patrols, smugglers sometimes forced asylum seekers travelling on their boats into the water. An Iraqi mother and her child drowned after Turkish smugglers forced them along with other illegal passengers off their boat near the coast of Greece. Seven Iraqis including a marine captain and two medical doctors were discovered hiding in a cargo container in the Egyptian port of Domiat (Damietta), northeast of Cairo. The container had been unloaded from a ship, which had sailed from Lebanon. The sounds of tapping coming from inside the container alerted the port workers to the presence of the human cargo inside.

Smugglers have also used the Southeast Asian route to take Iraqi asylum seekers to Australia and New Zealand. Most of these Iraqis were residents in Syria and Iran. They are taken first to one of Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia. From there, smugglers would ferry them to Australia or New Zealand, where they

would apply for asylum. Smugglers charged as much as seven thousand American dollars per person. Success was not guaranteed and an Iraqi risked losing the whole fee paid to the smuggler if arrested by the authorities at one of the transit countries and deported back to Syria or Iran. Iraqi asylum seekers using this route also faced the dangers of drowning or attacks by the notorious pirates in these areas. In the year 2000, more than two hundred Iraqis were presumed dead after three boats ferrying them to the shores of Australia were lost at sea. The first boat carrying more than 200 asylum seekers who were mostly Iraqis disappeared in a violent storm after it sailed from Java. More than fifty persons including women and children were on board the second missing boat. Eighty-one survivors were rescued from a third boat loaded with asylum seekers after it hit a reef and sank. An Iraqi refugee living in Canada told me that he was shocked to learn that his elder son was among a large group of refugees on a boat sailing to Australia when they were stopped by an Indonesian patrol boat and subsequently repatriated to Syria.

Finding smugglers

Iraqis who sought asylum in a European or North American country looked for smugglers who could provide them with passports, visas and airline tickets, book reservations for them and facilitate their departure. Many Iraqis met or heard of someone who could smuggle you out or put you in contact with a smuggler. These smugglers did not fit the stereotype described in the Western media. They were themselves refugees who became smugglers to make a living and many Iraqi refugees knew their identities. Their income from these illegal activities was modest by any standard. Refugees called them reckless or adventurous persons rather than criminals. They labeled them as indispensable providers of a necessary service but hastened to add that they themselves were not willing to work as smugglers. A smuggler risked arrest, detention and even physical abuse at the hands of the police or security agencies which most Iraqi refugees left their home country to avoid contact with their likes. One Iraqi refugee became a smuggler himself for the purpose of arranging the smuggling of his family members. He was arrested and put in confinement twice. His family had to pay a large bribe to a local security chief each time to secure his release. Another amateurish smuggler, who specialized in

forging visas, was turned back by the immigration officials of a European country because he was found in possession of 'crudely forged documents'. The fellow Iraqi who reported this story did not sympathize with him because of his high fees.

Forged and stolen passports

In the early 1990s, Iraqis who wanted to go to Europe faced one major obstacle, namely the sizeable fees demanded by smugglers which was US\$ 2000 on average. High demand gradually raised the fee to between US\$ 5000 and US\$ 7000. Fees vary somewhat depending on the country of destination, the cost of airline tickets and the passport chosen by the refugee. Smuggling refugees created a market for stolen or forged passports, visas and other documents. Numerous Iraqi dissidents would not have been able to reside and work in Arab countries without the help of forgers who provided them with forged Iraqi passports and renewed the validity of their expired documents. In the late 1980s, the Iraqi government put an end to this by issuing new passports. After the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from the Kurdish north, new genuine Iraqi passports became available on the black market. The price of one of these passports was initially US \$100 but soon after rose to \$1000.

Iraqi passports whether genuine or forged were of no use to refugees intent on travelling to a Western country because these countries no longer issued visas to Iraqis. Having a passport of another country then became a necessity for those refugees. Most of the passports provided by smugglers were either stolen or bought from their owners. Passport thieves usually targeted crowds in embassies. Some of the passports available on the market were obtained from dishonest hotels' managers. Apparently, some clients of these hotels departed without settling their bills leaving their passports behind them. These passports were not surrendered to the police or the embassies concerned as the laws stipulated but instead were sold to recoup the losses incurred by the hotels and an extra profit. Governments whose passports were stolen or sold and used for smuggling refugees took drastic measures to discourage trafficking in their passports. Some Arab countries imposed large fines on nationals who lost their passports and issued them travel documents in place of lost ones. The prices of stolen or sold passports varied. A Saudi Arabian or a United

Arab Emirates' passport for example fetched a higher price than passports of other Third-World countries. A Saudi passport was sold for as much as US\$ 2000 because Saudi nationals can travel to many countries such as Canada without entry visas. For a number of years, passports of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco were in high demand because holders could travel to some European countries without visas.

Possessing or using another person's passport or forged document is a serious, punishable offense in all countries. Iraqi refugees felt that resort to such illegal measures was morally justified because it was the only option available to them to escape an intolerable situation. They also defended their behavior by implicating almost everyone in the crimes of the Iraqi regime which forced them to flee Iraq. Since almost every Western government gave some form of assistance to the Iraqi regime in its war against Iran and directly or indirectly supported oppressing the Iraqi people, they believed that they are under no moral obligation to respect or uphold the laws of these nations regarding immigration. They were, of course, aware of the penalties for committing such infringements of the laws. However, it was for many of them a calculated risk they were willing to take. This was the attitude of the Iraqi exile that dared to use the stolen passport of the military attaché of an Arab country to travel to a European country. The offender was arrested at the airport and detained. Another story revealed the extent of anxiety felt by otherwise law-abiding Iraqis when they used a forged document:

I was given an Algerian passport which was either stolen or sold by its owner. The picture in the passport is mine but the description fits the real owner of the passport. The color of my eyes according to the passport is blue while my eyes are actually black. The forger who sold me the passport was unable to change this. It was the only passport available and I was in a hurry. I also did not want to arouse suspicion by wearing dark glasses so I averted my eyes every time I gave my passport to immigration officials.

He succeeded in reaching the country of destination and was granted refugee status.

The fear of being found and penalized for using forged documents disrupted an Iraqi family's plan to seek asylum in the United Kingdom:

Our trip Syria to Tunisia went out smoothly and without a snag. Our group included my mother, two of my brothers,

my brother-in-law and his family and myself. During our short stopover in Tunisia, we reconfirmed our reservation to London. On the day of our scheduled departure we drove to the airport and everyone was acting normally except my brother-in-law. At the last moment, he refused to go through with it. He claimed that the risk was too high. He was terrified that the Tunisian immigration officials would discover that our passports were forged and put us in jail or repatriate us to Iraq where death sentences awaited all of us. We argued and pleaded with him to change his mind but he was adamant and we all had to go back.

Raising the smuggler's fees

Refugees often borrowed from relatives or friends or sold the family's jewelry to finance their purchase of forged documents, tickets and pay travel expenses. The lure of asylum in a Western country is so strong that an Iraqi refugee may sell most of his belongings to pay the smugglers' fees:

He was standing in front of the post office. His light windbreaker was not enough to keep him warm. It was a cold day in January and he could not stop shivering. After exchanging the customary greetings, I asked him why he is not wearing his heavy coat, and he told me that he sold it to pay the smugglers.

If available funds were not sufficient to pay for the smuggling of all family members, young male members were sent out first. They were expected to work and save enough to pay for the smuggling of other members later. This led to a painful separation of members from different generations within the same family. For example, the parents could still be residing in Syria while one son lived in Denmark, another in the United Kingdom and a daughter in Canada.

A refugee could recoup some of the expenses of his asylum trip by selling the forged passport or by returning it to the smugglers after using it. The savings could amount to as much as one third of the total cost. However, asylum seekers were usually advised by smugglers to tear up their passports on the airplane before arrival at the destination

country. If immigration officials found the passport, they would most probably deport the asylum seeker. However, some found the temptation of regaining some of the expenses too strong to resist and concealed passports on their persons or in their luggage. According to refugees who followed these cases closely, the risk of discovery and deportation was high. Searches conducted by immigration officials were very thorough and only a naïve person would hide his passport in his shoe for example because that was one of the first places searched. A safer method attempted successfully by some Iraqis was to approach a fellow passenger and ask him or her to take the passport through immigration and return it later.

In addition to destroying their passports, asylum seekers were given detailed guidelines in order to avoid repatriation to the country of departure. In specific, they were told to wait for several hours or as long as possible after arrival before presenting themselves to immigration officials and ask for asylum. This was necessary to avoid being sent back on the same airliner. They must also be prepared in advance to answer questions put to them and be consistent in their replies. Although many of them have been living for years in Iran, Syria or Jordan, all asylum seekers must heed the advice of their smugglers and experienced friends by invariably claiming to have fled Iraq very recently.

The religious rituals undertaken by some of them before departure clearly underlined the importance of obtaining asylum for these Iraqis. Since this was considered a highly cherished goal, some believed that their chances of attaining it could be improved by performing in advance an act of devotion or charity. Some offered prayers or vowed to donate alms if the attempt succeeded. One refugee spent all night before his scheduled flight to Denmark praying and, according to a fellow asylum seeker, his religious devotion was justly rewarded the next day.

Choosing a country of asylum

Iraqi asylum seekers did not always choose the country of destination. The decisive factor was usually the forged passport used. A stolen or purchased Saudi Arabian passport, for example, allowed the holder to travel to Canada and apply for asylum there or in a European country where the airliner made a stopover. One refugee

described the dilemma of choosing between two countries of asylum that he faced at the airport in Amsterdam as follows:

We made a stopover in Holland. I was impressed by the scenery as the plane was descending. In the transit lounge I was thinking to myself whether it is better to tear up the passports and ask for asylum in Holland or continue to North America. The Dutch farms looked beautiful and I am still a farmer at heart.

Iraqi exiles did have preferences as to where they, and their families, would like to spend the rest of their lives or at least until the regime in Baghdad was overthrown. As mentioned earlier, most asylum seekers favored Scandinavian countries because of their compassionate immigration policies and their generous treatment of refugees. The United Kingdom was chosen by educated Iraqis in the hope of finding gainful employment there and also by dissidents who planned to continue their opposition activities within the large and politically active Iraqi community in that country. Another incentive for choosing the UK or other English speaking countries was the language since English is the second language in Iraq and polishing or improving their English skills was thought to be much easier than learning another language such as a difficult Scandinavian language. Family men expressed their preference for countries with large Muslim communities where it was easier to practice their religious customs and rituals and raise their families in accordance with religious teachings and traditional values. Countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand were not at the top of the list for asylum seekers who planned to travel frequently to Middle Eastern countries to meet with relatives and friends after obtaining refugee status. Some refugees also compared welfare payments in different countries before making a final choice or a preference.

Refugees also had preferences regarding the routes taking them to their countries of refuge. For example, they avoided the Russian route leading to an asylum in a Western European country because of the possibility of a long delay and the involvement of organized smuggling rings. On the advantage side, flying to Moscow was relatively easy and cheaper. Russian embassies used to grant Iraqis entry visas on their expired or forged passports, and the airfare was reasonable. Also living expenses in Moscow were low compared to those in other European capitals. However, a number of refugees who used this route advised others against it. Few who could not arrange for their safe passage to

a Western country eventually gave up and returned. Other less-favored routes involved stopovers in Pakistan or Turkey. The Northern-African route was popular among refugees until European countries introduced restrictions on the entry of North African nationals. More refugees were being smuggled to Australia and New Zealand through the Philippines or Indonesia.

A number of refugees who were admitted into Scandinavian countries and granted refugee status there had a change of heart after experiencing difficulties in learning the language, finding suitable employment and adjusting to their host's culture. Many of them attempted later to obtain refugee status in the United States or Canada where better work opportunities are available. After arriving in Mexico, they were smuggled across the American borders where they applied for refugee status. This is illustrated by the following story as told by a cousin of one asylum seeker:

My cousin was a refugee in Denmark but could not find employment there. He wanted to go to the States and my family asked me to help him. I sent him the money for the trip. By the way, this is why I have no savings after spending so many years in the West. My family back in Iraq expects me to help them financially and I can't disappoint them. I spent tens of thousands of dollars on helping my brothers and other relatives to leave Iraq and seek asylum in European countries. Anyhow this cousin of mine eventually called me from Mexico to tell me that he arrived there but I haven't heard from him again. I am worried that my family will blame me if something bad happens to him while trying to cross the borders but what can I do? I hear stories of refugees getting killed in this area and I am afraid that my cousin could become one of these victims.

In conclusion, several factors contributed to the exodus of Iraqis living in Syria and Iran toward Western countries. First, the growing signs of strength shown by the Iraqi regime in the late 1990s diminished the prospects of an imminent political change in Iraq. Second, many refugees viewed improvements in relations between the Iraqi government and its neighbors as ominous. Third, a refugee status or naturalization in a Western country was seen by many of them as the only solution to most of their security and financial problems.

How a refugee poisoned with Thallium obtained asylum

The mysterious death of several Iraqi dissidents shortly after their release from Iraqi prisons raised suspicion about the circumstances of their death. Medical tests on released prisoners who managed to leave Iraq showed traces of Thallium in their bodies. Thallium is a highly poisonous heavy chemical compound. All of these victims exhibited symptoms of poisoning with a heavy chemical compound such as rapid hair loss, liver failure, blindness and brain damage. These results led to the conclusion that Iraqi security agents must have secreted this substance in the meals given to these prisoners before their release.

One of the early victims of this macabre form of execution was a known and respected female pediatrician. A refugee related her story as follows:

She was my infant daughter's pediatrician. My wife and I took our daughter to her for regular check-ups. My wife liked her very much. She was an accomplished physician and had excellent bedside manners. One day we took our daughter for her scheduled examination and the good doctor was not in and her clinic was closed. It was unlike her. Doctors who leave their clinics on an emergency or go on holiday usually leave a note on the door. We asked the people next door and they were suspiciously evasive. We headed back home feeling a little disappointed with the doctor. Soon after that we left the country. It was not before two or three years when we heard about her imprisonment and death. The circumstances of her death shocked and saddened us beyond description. According to a close relative of her, she was released shortly before her death. Immediately after, she began to complain of horrible pain. The pain was so intense and her suffering was so immense that her mother said that she prayed for any kind of relief for her daughter even death. The doctor finally died.

There were also reports of victims of poisoning by Thallium among Iraqi dissidents living abroad. At least one Iraqi exile died of Thallium poisoning after dining with a number of Iraqis suspected of being agents of the regime in a London restaurant.

An alleged attempt was made on the life of another Iraqi in northern Iraq. After hearing the news of their brother's illness, the three young Iraqis residing in Syria hired a taxi and headed towards the Iraqi

borders. They learned that he suddenly fell ill and was rushed to a hospital. Recently he made several trips to the Kurdish zone to meet with Iraqi dissidents. There was an unconfirmed rumor that a number of factions in the Iraqi opposition were preparing to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Thousands of deserters from the Iraqi army and their Kurdish allies had completed their necessary training and were reportedly ready to march on Baghdad from their bases in the north.

After learning about the symptoms, his brothers concluded that he was poisoned. They also told everyone that he was a victim of an assassination attempt by Iraqi agents. Security measures implemented by Kurdish factions controlling the zone were ineffective in stopping infiltrators sent by Iraqi security agencies.

Medical facilities for the treatments of such cases were unavailable in the Kurdish enclave and the victim's brothers decided to transport him to Syria. Upon arrival in Damascus he was admitted into a hospital where several top local specialists examined him. They found none of the classical symptoms of heavy metal poisoning such as loss of hair and partial paralysis. Few days later, his brothers decided to send him to England where he can receive proper medical treatment. They were told at the British embassy to submit a visa application and proof of financial funds sufficient to pay for his medical and other expenses and a confirmed appointment with a medical doctor or a hospital reservation in Britain. Unable to meet these conditions, his brothers considered whether to apply for political asylum from the British immigration authorities.

In the meantime, the report of the laboratory arrived and the results of blood analysis showed no traces of Thallium. His brothers insisted that the results were incorrect and requested more tests. They then decided to apply for a visa on the basis of the medical report prepared by the doctor who examined him in northern Iraq. By showing me the report first, they spared themselves an embarrassing situation and an instant rejection. In the brief report, the Iraqi doctor's diagnosis scribbled in barely legible English indicated alcohol poisoning. His brothers were shocked. They admitted that he was a heavy drinker but insisted that his condition was the result of Thallium poisoning by Iraqi agents and not alcohol poisoning.

Their conviction was vindicated by the results of new tests, which detected traces of Thallium. The amount was small but it was sufficient proof. They were eager to go to the embassy with these results without any further delay. Their confidence in obtaining visa for him was

bolstered by assurances from other refugees that the British immigration authorities are bound to look favorably on the application. The visa application was submitted and the required fee was paid.

The decision on their application finally arrived. On that day, few seats were occupied in the waiting lounge of the British consulate. I sat with two of the brothers under a large picture of Queen Elizabeth. In front of us, two Kurdish couples chattered in their mother tongue. The young women wore heavy makeup and new bright-colored dresses. Kurdish women are known for their fondness for colorful garments. I could not help noticing something else about the two young women: they lifted and shook their hands repeatedly. I assumed that they wanted everyone present to see the several golden bracelets adorning their hands. They were probably newly-wed and, unlike most peasant women, did not fear envy. The young men were also showing off their British passports but those of their wives or fiancées were Iraqi. Marriages were arranged every week between Iraqi men living as refugees in Europe or North America and Iraqi or Syrian women.

It was finally our turn and the consulate official informed us that the application had been rejected due to lack of supporting documents. The Consulate, however, would reconsider its decision if a financial guarantee and a letter from a British doctor or medical establishment were presented. We were naturally disappointed. The brothers of the Thallium-poisoned Iraqi were hoping that he would be granted not only a visa but also political asylum for himself, his wife and children. If this had happened, they could then use the money earmarked for smuggling him and his family to finance the flight of other family members.

"If the British consulate does not grant our brother a visa, we will find another way," they vowed in anger.

Within a week, the patient was making steady recovery. He was strong enough to sit in bed and receive the numerous visitors who crowded his small room in the hospital. Few weeks later, the brothers carried their promise. He along with his wife and children boarded a flight to London and upon arrival at Heathrow Airport they applied for asylum.

Chapter Four: Surviving in Exile

“Please tell them that we are not here for the money.” These were the exact words a refugee living in a European country urged me to write in this book. As a tradition-bound Iraqi, he was unhappy with having to live on welfare assistance. How a man like him earns his livelihood strongly influences his status in his community and his sense of dignity and pride. Living on charity or from illicit gains is regarded as a shameful act which results in loss of face. Although poverty is not considered disgraceful in itself, a poor man is more likely to degrade and humiliate himself by begging others for charity. Many Iraqis firmly believed that the regime in Baghdad systematically exploited this cultural trait to break their will to resist. Oppression, wars and economic crises, they argued, were deliberately engineered and prolonged by the regime to make survival rather than self-respect, dignity and pride the predominant concern of Iraqis rendering them subservient to it.

Scrounging a livelihood

Contrary to the expectations of Iraqi exiles and refugees, crossing the borders into another country did not make all their problems disappear instantly. It did rescue them from the regime’s oppression and the possibility of a premature death or serious injury in one of his internal pogroms or border wars, but it did not automatically solve their financial problems. As mentioned earlier, refugees expelled by Iraq in the 1980s had their assets confiscated by the regime and many of them had to abandon their careers and terminate their education. Many of those who left in the early 1990s were conscripts whose education and careers were interrupted by eight years of war with Iran. High rates of unemployment and inflation compelled more Iraqis to leave their country.

These Iraqis were faced with the formidable task of making a living for themselves and their dependents in foreign countries and without funds, educational and experience certificates, and the support of family and friends. Cultural differences and the language barriers significantly reduced their chances of finding employment, learning new skills and gaining the necessary local experience. They also lacked the social networks which could facilitate their search for

employment. Some were unable to surmount all these obstacles and had to rely on the welfare system of their host countries. Others had to put aside their qualifications and risk losing face by working in unskilled jobs.

The plight of Iraqis forced to leave their country in search of a livelihood was painfully reflected in stories and observations brought back by visitors to Amman, the Jordanian capital. They described the sad scenes of old Iraqi women who instead of enjoying the comfort of their homes and the attention and care of their children and grandchildren, came to this foreign city to become street vendors and beggars. There were also stories about Iraqi women working as prostitutes in Amman. Iraqis who painfully admitted the authenticity of these stories presented them as evidence of the disastrous policies of the Iraqi regime. According to one of these stories, a prostitute told an Iraqi visitor who scolded her for breaking religious commandments and bringing disgrace upon herself and her family: "I had no choice. It was either this or my whole family back in Iraq would starve." A taxi driver in Jordan bragged in front of me about saving an Iraqi girl of becoming a prostitute by finding her a decent job.

In spite of all the formidable obstacles and tragic stories, Iraqi refugees were generally successful in financially supporting themselves and their families and providing valuable financial help for their relatives in Iraq. Although notable success stories may be hard to find, the struggle of these refugees is admirable as the stories included in this chapter show.

The worst nightmare of Shurja merchants

Iraqi Shias have been significantly active in the field of commerce. They may have been driven to this more by sectarian discrimination and politics rather than personal choice or aptitude. Under the Sunni Ottoman, they were virtually barred from attending public schools, military academies and government employment. During the subsequent period of British occupation and mandate, Iraqi Shias willingly refrained from applying for positions in the public service in compliance with religious *fatwas* or edicts, which forbade them from supporting the occupation forces in any manner. These restrictions led many Iraqi Shias to enter the field of commerce as merchants, shopkeepers, middlemen and moneylenders. Some Shias believe that

the minority Sunnis who virtually monopolized the political leadership and the officer corps in the armed forces and controlled the civil service became envious of the Shia's share of the commerce sector. This envy, the Shias argued, was behind the Sunni rulers' decision to nationalize exports, imports and domestic trade in the 1960s and 1970s. Many Shias also believe that one of the objectives of the mass expulsion of Shias in the 1980s was putting an end to the Shia major share of domestic trade. According to one story widely believed among refugees and exiles, the Iraqi security agency achieved this in less than a day. It happened one morning when buses were dispatched by the agency to the wholesale Shurja bazaar in downtown Baghdad. Security agents accompanying these buses presented themselves to Shia merchants in the bazaar as employees of the Ministry of Foreign Trade sent to personally deliver to all of them invitations from the minister to attend a meeting with him scheduled for the same morning. Any merchant who inquired about the subject of this meeting was told that the minister wanted to discuss with merchants ways and means of improving procedures for obtaining export and import licenses. The merchants believing this to be true left their assistants and managers in charge of their businesses and boarded the buses with the agents. They were understandably shocked and alarmed when the buses sped past the headquarters of the Ministry, which is a ten-minute drive from the bazaar, and headed eastward in the busy streets of Baghdad. The buses finally stopped inside the enormous compound of the dreaded Directorate General of Security where the baffled merchants were told about their expulsion orders and the confiscation of their assets.

Middlemen of the bazaar

Many of the Iraqis who settled down in countries bordering Iraq, Western Europe and North America chose to work in trade, commerce and real estate. Some of them had prior experience in this field but many of them assumed that anyone who knows how to buy and sell could succeed in commerce. Other factors which the generally independent-minded and financially insecure Iraqis found attractive in this field were the opportunity to establish and manage their own businesses and the high return on investment. Few of them possessed or managed to raise the capital necessary to own a trading business or a shop while most of them were content to work as middlemen and

travelling salesmen. One of these refugees recalled to me how he became a travelling salesman in Iran in the 1980s:

My father was a farmer in southern Iraq but I moved to Baghdad and worked in the used car business. I used to make a lot of money. After the security forces killed my brother in the early 1980s, I left for Iran. When I arrived there, I did not speak a single word of Farsi. The war was on and there was no work for people like me. I decided to try my luck as a traveling salesman. I bought merchandise from shops in Tehran and Qom with the small capital I smuggled out of Iraq and transported them in my car to remote Iranian cities and towns or wherever there was a demand for them. I traveled as far south as Bandar Abbas on the Arabian Sea. My business provided me with a decent income, which was sufficient to support my family.

Serving pilgrims in al-Saida

Iraqi exiles faced the same situation in Syria. Employment opportunities were almost nonexistent for Iraqis and they turned in large numbers to trade and commerce. Few of them established thriving businesses in real estates, construction, and the whole sale and retail trade. They owned supermarkets, jewelry stores and shops in the bazaars of Damascus and al-Saida. The less fortunate among them sold their merchandise in kiosks or carts. Investment put into these ventures was relatively modest and ranged from several hundred thousands of dollars needed to open a jewelry store or a convenience shop to several hundred spent on acquiring a display box used in street peddling. Most Iraqis lacked savings and could not borrow to raise capital for large or medium investment projects.

An Iraqi refugee in Syria who was a member of a wealthy landed family needed two partners to rent and equip a small souvenir kiosk. As the case with most small businesses in their first year of operation, return on investment was low. When the opportunity arose to seek asylum in a European country, he did not hesitate to abandon his share in the small business and leave before even finding a buyer. Most of the small businesses owned or operated by these Iraqis were located in al-Saida, where most of them also lived.

Iraqi refugees living in al-Saida supported commercial establishments owned by other refugees. When a refugee wanted to buy the mandatory gifts of jewelry for his fiancée, he was told to go first to an Iraqi jeweler. However, much of the demand for the goods and services offered by these businesses was seasonal and came mainly from pilgrims and visitors.

Business and commercial activities slowed down during winter months. Few visitors and pilgrims were seen in the streets of al-Saida or inside the shrine. Construction work on new buildings or houses was also interrupted. An Iraqi exile who visited to the kiosk market in al-Saida in winter described the depressing scene:

I went to al-Saida looking for a number of titles on religion for a friend in the United States. I was told by someone to try the market near al-Saida shrine. The market was made up of several rows of kiosks. It was almost noontime and the few open kiosks sold fabrics, garments and cheap plastic household goods. I finally located the bookstore but the owner was not in. I had time to scan almost all the titles of the books in his bookstore before the owner showed up. He explained that he was performing the noon prayer in the mosque adjoining the shrine. On that day the shoppers were fewer than the kiosk-owners and the bookstore owner was not worried about shoplifters.

Iraqis who lived in al-Saida assured me that the situation is different in the summer when visitors from Iran and the Gulf Arab states flocked to their town. They turned al-Saida into a busy market town where many Iraqis earned enough to support themselves and their families until the next summer. Iraqis began to speculate about the number of expected tourists and pilgrims who will come to stay in al-Saida and the volume of business they would generate well before the end of winter. Whenever few of them gathered together for a social function or a religious occasion, the conversation was bound to touch upon two subjects. The first one was most probably new developments, or lack of them, inside Iraq such as new operations by the opposition and the current exchange rate of the Iraqi dinar. Forecasting the forthcoming tourist and pilgrim season and analyzing the current one was the second most frequent topic of discussion in these meetings. After considering a number of criteria, they would make a prediction. For example, if the blackouts and the rationing of water were more than the usual during the preceding summer, they expected fewer pilgrims

and tourists. Arab gulf nationals are accustomed to a certain lifestyle, which include nonstop water and electricity supply, telephone services and air conditioning.

Refugees in al-Saida also followed closely news of possible normalization of relationship with Iraq. The possibility of a rapprochement between the two countries worried them not only because it would strengthen the Iraqi regime's hold on power but also for its repercussions on their livelihood. Since mid-1980s, the Islamic government in Iran were sending at its own expense large numbers of Iranians every week to visit al-Saida shrine. They were mainly relatives of soldiers and *basijis* or volunteers killed in the war with Iraq. Weekly flights transported them to Damascus where they stayed in hotels reserved for them. Chartered buses ferried them daily to al-Saida to visit the shrine and shop in the markets. Iraqis who had business interests in al-Saida were naturally alarmed by unconfirmed news that the Iraqi government was planning to allow Iranians and Gulf nationals to visit the Shia shrines in Iraq. If this turned out to be true, these refugees speculated, it would mean that most visitors who usually came to al-Saida during summer would go to Iraq instead taking with them much of the demand for the goods and services provided by them. They were certainly relieved when an agreement between Iraq and Iran on this issue proved to be chronically elusive. However, the Iraqi government succeeded in attracting some Shia nationals of Gulf countries banned by their governments from travelling to Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait by exempting them from having their passports stamped at the Iraqi borders.

Iraqi merchants and middlemen working in al-Saida had an advantage over their Syrian competitors because some of them spent several years in Iran before moving to Syria. They were not only fluent in Farsi but were also better informed about Iranian tastes and preferences and had more experience in dealing with Iranian customers and merchants. An additional advantage was the religious sect shared by the Iraqi refugee and their Iranian customers.

Iraqis, however, pointed out that making a decent profit from transactions with the shrewd Iranian merchants and customers was far from easy. Many Iranian visitors brought with them rugs, beads, silver jewelry, herbs and nuts to sell in Syria. They were frequently seen going from one store to another in the famous Hamidia bazaar in central Damascus peddling their merchandise. Some of the Syrian shopkeepers learned enough Farsi phrases from these commercial

encounters to use in bargaining and haggling with them. Money earned from these transactions was used by the Iranians to buy clothes, blankets and gifts to take back with them. Although these commercial activities violated Syrian laws, the authorities ignored them for the sake of maintaining strategic political and commercial ties with the Iranian government.

Many Iraqis worked as middlemen buying from and selling to Iranian pilgrims. You could observe them standing at bus terminals waiting for the arrival of Iranian pilgrims. As soon as the Iranians disembarked Iraqi middlemen hurried to offer them their services. Interested passengers lingered to listen to them and were seen going back into their bus to fetch a rug, a blanket or bags of pistachio. After the middleman inspected the merchandise, haggling over the price begins. The Iranians sold to the highest bidders.

The favored location for sidewalk peddlers was near the main entrance to al-Saida shrine where they can catch the eyes and attention of pilgrims entering or leaving the shrine. They sold silver rings, religious beads, semiprecious stones, cheap watches and other reasonably priced goods. Some of them displayed their goods in glass-topped wooden cases while others arranged them neatly on nylon sheets laid on the pavement. Since their overhead expenses were minimal, their prices were competitive compared to those in shops. In Middle Eastern countries in general, it is customary for persons returning from a long trip to bring with them gifts for their family, relatives and friends. In the case of pilgrims and visitors to shrines, these gifts do not only have a sentimental value but also a religious significance. Their recipients treasure these gifts which are considered 'blessed'.

Municipal policemen regularly patrolled the streets and bazaars of al-Saida. Their main targets were peddlers and smugglers. You could tell that one of these policemen was sighted in the vicinity when peddlers suddenly became panic-stricken, collected their merchandise in a hurry and dispersed in different directions. The penalty for peddling without a license or any other real or imaginary violation alleged by these officers could be the detention of the peddler and the confiscation of his cart or display case with all its contents. A small bribe sometime spared a peddler the heavy-handed harassment of unscrupulous municipal policemen.

These policemen were usually more interested in stopping smuggler and confiscating contraband items. Some stores displayed smuggled

electrical razors, small household appliances and cigarettes. Owners admitted that they were taking a risk by doing that but they explained that market forces dictated it. "If the next shop is selling a smuggled foreign made electric razor, then I have no choice but to do the same" one Iraqi storeowner reasoned. "I do not like to break the law, but it is the only way to do business here." One summer, the police made a surprise major raid and several Iraqi peddlers and shopkeepers were detained, fined and had their merchandise confiscated. Iraqi refugees were generally alarmed by the incident and for many days after, it was the major topic of discussion in husaynias and coffeehouses frequented by them. Some of them speculated that the raid was implemented in response to pressures from Syrian merchants who resented the Iraqi competition. Others wondered if this was not the beginning of a harassment campaign that will soon target all of them.

Few were willing to take even greater risks by selling contraband cigarettes or exchanging foreign currencies. The fear of being caught by the police kept the roommate of a cigarette peddler awake on many nights as he explained:

I could no longer live with him in the same apartment. His room was full of smuggled cigarette cartoons. Strangers knocked on our door at all times of the day and night to buy cigarettes. What if the police become aware of my roommate's illicit activities? Surely, they are not going to investigate or listen to my pleas of innocence. They will arrest me along with him and charge us both for smuggling and dealing in smuggled goods. This is why I told him to look for another roommate.

Buying and selling foreign currencies was even a more serious offense. A conviction could result in a lengthy jail sentence. When a new refugee took out an American twenty-dollar bill from his wallet, he was advised by an acquaintance to keep it at home. Black-market currency deals were usually conducted through middlemen who assumed all the risk of being found and detained by the police. At least one Iraqi was convicted of illegal currency deals and was serving a long sentence in 1997.

In spite of the danger of working with suspicious characters and the risk of imprisonment, few Iraqis were driven by lack of work opportunities and lucrative profits to become smugglers and middlemen in currency deals. The source of contraband merchandise sold in Syria was Lebanon where its free market economy imposed

few restrictions on imports and exports. Until the late 1990s, persons interested in purchasing American, European and Japanese appliances, televisions, furniture, garments, toys and other household items used to drive to Matha'ya. The main street in the small town near the Syrian-Lebanese borders was lined on both sides with shops full of smuggled goods. Smugglers also offered to deliver to any address in the capital. These smugglers transported their merchandise from Lebanon on trained mules across mountain tracks.

Person with special permits can avoid border customs and passports checkpoints by taking the 'military route'. It was common knowledge among Iraqi refugees that any one of them who wanted to spend few days in Beirut either to visit relatives, enjoy the scenery or do some shopping could do it without the need for a passport or a visa. Some Iraqis with permits to use the military route were reportedly earning a decent income from transporting refugees back and forth from Beirut. They charge fifty American dollars per person per trip. Many refugees who were surviving on subsistence incomes considered this fee to be exorbitant. One refugee, however, thought it was a small price to pay for a taste of the freedom of travel which he had not experienced in many years. Another was thankful for the service because it was the only way for refugees to travel to Beirut where they can apply for refugee status at the office of the UNHCR there.

Rumors alleged that some Iraqis were also using the special military route for smuggling contrabands. Some used it to bring in items like cereals and powdered milk for their stores. Another refugee who pretended to be a religious scholar strongly denied accusations of smuggling until one day his car overturned on the international highway between Damascus and Beirut and a whole shipment of wrist watches spilled out of its trunk.

Visitors who came to pay homage to al-Saida shrine also generated demand for the services of Iraqi middlemen. Many of the Gulf nationals rented homes or flats for the duration of the summer months and a number of Iraqis profited from acting as rental agents. One Iraqi augmented his income by renting his small car to interested visitors. Many of the houses in al-Saida did not have telephones because demand exceeded the capacity of the public telephone utility. This prompted a number of refugees to offer communication services for tourists and pilgrims from small offices equipped with facsimile

machines and telephone lines bought at high prices from private owners.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the demand for forged passports, visas and tickets by refugees who wished to seek asylum in Western countries created a lucrative business for few Iraqis. An Iraqi refugee who claimed that he went into this business for the sole purpose of sending his family to a European country was jailed for several months before a heavy fine was paid to secure his release. Resumption of his illegal activities led to his arrest again. After paying a second heavy fine, his relatives strongly advised him to leave the country.

Iraqi professionals in exile

Iraqis brag about the number of institutes of higher education and university graduates and the quality of education in their country. Their love of learning is also widely recognized. It is said that books in Arabic are often written in Egypt, published in Lebanon and sold and read in Iraq. Since the Second World War, a college or university education was regarded in Iraq as the shortest road to financial security, high social status and a confirmed place in the country's middle class. The wars, internal conflicts and economic disasters orchestrated by the regime in power since 1968 have put an end to these aspirations. Many of the best and brightest of Iraqi scientists, academics, scholars, medical doctors and engineers have either been executed, imprisoned or forced to leave the country. To give just two examples, the pediatrician whose story was told in the previous chapter was executed for practicing her religion and the country's leading scientist in the field of nuclear physics was imprisoned but managed to escape.

High-talented Iraqi expatriates preferred to work in Gulf countries where salaries were relatively high. After the invasion of Kuwait, more restrictions were imposed on the employment of Iraqis in some of these countries. The sharp decline in living standards and real wages resulting from the UN-imposed sanctions led more Iraqi academics, professionals and graduates to seek employment in Jordanian universities and companies. These options were not available to refugees in Iran and Syria because Iraqi authorities had confiscated their passports or refused to renew them. As mentioned earlier,

employment opportunities for Iraqis in countries bordering Iraq were few and only those with strong connections were employed in government jobs. Also, the pay was generally low and the prospects of promotion or raises were almost nonexistent. A lecturer at one of the universities complained that his pay was not enough to cover his transportation expenses and would not buy him a decent pair of shoes. And even after spending many years in this position and befriending his work colleagues, he still felt as an outsider. He explained that he accepted the job only because it allowed him to do something that he liked, namely teaching, and it helped him to keep in touch with developments in his field of specialization. Eventually, his independent mind and non-conformist opinions came to the attention of the authorities and he finally had to abandon his position and leave the country.

Professionals needed work permits and union membership cards before opening their offices and clinics and offering their services to the public. Most of them opened their offices or clinics in cities and neighborhoods where fellow Iraqis lived such as al-Saida in Syria. There was at least one exception to this tendency. An Iraqi lawyer who ran a successful law business chose to open his office in another neighborhood because he did not want to become totally dependent on Iraqi clients. He believed that Iraqis must adapt to the ways of working and doing business in the country of refuge even to the extent of 'going native' in order to succeed in their professions and jobs. As the following two stories illustrate, some professionals found it difficult to follow this advice.

From architect to refugee

At the time of his graduation from the Faculty of Architecture at Damascus University he was in his late twenties and if his father did not know the right people his chances of employment would have been practically nil. His father used his connections to secure employment for him in a government construction company, but the young ambitious architect wanted to open his own architectural and construction company. His father reluctantly gave his consent and provided him with a small capital to enter into a partnership with two other refugees. Within few months, serious disagreements over the management of the company led to its premature dissolution. The

architect blamed his partners for the failure of the company and, against his father's wishes, he decided to continue on his own. According to him, he did not really have a choice: it was either this or living on handouts from his father. Demand for his services in al-Saida was low and he had to compete with local contractors over small home improvement projects. He complained that his few Iraqi clients often haggled with him over prices and expected him to make little or no profit from the work he did for them. He convinced himself that the experience of running his own contracting business compensated for the low income and inconvenient work hours.

Most of the construction works undertaken by him were unlicensed because his clients refused to pay the high license fees to the municipality. He reluctantly accepted to avoid losing his few clients to the competition. Often, he had to work at night or on weekends and holidays when municipal inspectors were not patrolling the streets. "If the job is unlicensed," he explained. "I must have at least the basic work completed at night or on a Friday when most inspectors are off-duty. If the inspector catches us while we are still pouring the cement for the foundation or putting up walls, they will tear them down and confiscate our construction tools. I may even lose my license. But if the basic work is finished, they can only give us a ticket for violating the building code and order us to pay a fine."

Unfavorable work conditions and low income finally led him to accept a position in the United Arab Emirates. The job was unsuitable for his qualifications and its pay was only slightly higher than what he was making as an independent contractor but he was hoping to find a more suitable and high paying job in due time. His high expectations for the future encouraged him to speed up his marriage plans. Unfortunately, his hopes and expectations were not fulfilled, and after few frustrating months his patience was exhausted. After his employer delayed payment of his salaries for several months, he resigned and returned to his contracting business in al-Saida.

Three years later he gave up on his business and accepted a job secured for him by his father. His salary was not enough to support a family of four. He and his father finally agreed that the best solution might be in applying for asylum in another country. Months later, the local office of the UNHCR informed him that his application had been approved and further steps have been taken to find a country that will accept to grant him, his wife and two children asylum.

A doctor faces unfair competition

Medical doctors are highly esteemed in Arab countries because of their healing skills and high incomes. A career in medicine is usually the first choice of high school students but only those who obtain the highest averages or have influential families are accepted in medical colleges. Iraqis love to brag about the high standards of medical education and profession in their country which were internationally recognized. After graduation, many Iraqi doctors travel to the United Kingdom to study for higher degrees. Although most of them return home after completion of their studies, some choose to live and work abroad.

Iraqi doctors in Iran and Syria were more fortunate than other professionals. Most of them worked in government or private hospitals and some of them opened their own clinics. Undeniably, the shabby clinic of one Iraqi doctor in al-Saida did not reflect the high status and prestige of his profession. A curtain running the length of the single-room clinic separated the examination area from the combined office and waiting area. Every word exchanged by the doctor and a patient under examination could be clearly heard by other patients waiting for their turn. Most of his regular patients were Iraqi refugees, but during summer visitors from the Gulf also came to the clinic for medical checkup and treatment.

The state of his clinic, which on the night of my visit was empty, clearly indicated that his practice was far from thriving. He was eager to justify this by claiming that other doctors were attempting to steal his patients from him by using unethical practices. His anger was directed in particular at a local doctor who had recently opened a clinic next door and employed a beautiful receptionist. In his opinion, the receptionist was intended to lure patients from Gulf countries. Also, the noise coming often from his neighbor's clinic irritated him enough to consider filing a complaint with the security police.

Sacred and profane professions

A number of Iraqi refugees earned their livelihoods from religious or political professions and activities. The city of Qom is a major religious center in Iran and many hawzas or religious schools in it offer religious instruction to Shias of different nationalities. Prominent Shia leaders

opened smaller religious academies in al-Saida, London and other cities around the world. These schools are traditionally financed by religious taxes paid to religious leaders and from private donations and do not require fees from their students. Many Iraqis enrolled in these schools to become religious teachers and scholars and were entitled to monthly allowances to cover their living expenses.

The success of Iranian religious leaders in overthrowing the Shah regime and establishing an Islamic republic significantly enhanced the prestige of the religious profession among Shias. Many Iraqi Shias admired these leaders and wanted to emulate them. Most of the students in religious schools were genuinely interested in religious studies and were ready to accept the solemn duties and responsibilities associated with their future roles as religious leaders and teachers. However, the financial assistance justified as necessary to enable seminary students to concentrate on their studies was believed by some to be the main incentive attracting a number of Iraqi exiles.

One cleric presently residing in Canada was critical of the way in which these religious schools were run. In specific, he thought that some clerics responsible for the distribution of grants to religious students sometimes acted arbitrarily and unfairly. He recalled the following incident in which he lost his temper and reacted violently to what he perceived to be a humiliating abuse of authority by one of these officials:

The religious functionary responsible for distributing monthly allowances was reposing on a mattress when I entered his office. Many students like me were sitting around waiting for their allowances. I asked for my allowance and he told me to come back after few days. I became angry because he treated us like beggars. It is not his money and he did not inherit it from his parents. And it wasn't the first time that he acted in this way. I swore at him and when he saw that I was very angry he ran and hid in another room.

This cleric confirmed that the grant given by these schools was a vital source of income for many unfortunate Iraqis living in exile. He offered this option to his son who left Iraq after him but he declined.

Students who successfully graduate from these seminaries are usually put in charge of a husaynia, which serves as a Shia mosque and religious center. Their main duties include leading daily communal prayers, answering questions on religion, collecting religious taxes and

charities and conducting the *az'a* or commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and other religious services. In return for these services, they receive salaries from the higher religious authorities who appoint them or from the community they serve.

Some secular and religious elements within Iraqi exiles were critical of the opulent lifestyle of some these religious leaders and clerics and accuse them of abusing religious taxes and charitable donations for this purpose. They complained of the presence of opportunists in the religious establishment who are interested mainly in amassing wealth and gaining status and influence. In response to these allegations, clerics point out that most of them receive modest or subsistence pay in return for invaluable services rendered to Shias in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. They also draw the attention of their critics to their active involvement in political and social change movements and especially their opposition to tyrannical governments. As a result of these activities, many of them were executed, imprisoned or exiled. A number of them were also assassinated by members of rival sects and their religious centers and houses were burnt down. Indeed, the religious profession is far from being risk-free as one Iraqi cleric asserted. Shortly after his arrival in Brazil on a religious mission, he became the victim of an armed robbery which led him to resign his post.

Working in the political arena has also benefited some Iraqis financially and provided others with job opportunities. After the defeat of the Iraqi forces in the second Gulf war, several Iraqi opposition groups were formed in anticipation of an imminent removal of the Iraqi regime. With few exceptions, retired politicians and political figures living in exile founded these groups. These groups were invited to conferences organized by the opposition and met with representatives of countries opposed to the Iraqi regime. It was hoped that these groups would rally Iraqis behind them in bringing down the regime and insure an orderly transition to a democratic government. Several of these groups received generous grants from Gulf countries. These grants enabled opposition groups to publish newspapers and to attract new members. In some cases, members were paid monthly allowances that varied with age, marital status and importance of duties and responsibilities assigned to them. A junior member in one of these newly formed opposition parties stationed in Syria was reportedly paid a monthly salary of three hundred dollars which is three

times the per capita income in this country. It was also alleged that one refugee received five salaries from different opposition groups.

“The Syrian government and I were the principal beneficiaries of Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait,” bragged one prominent refugee who was previously a prominent supporter of the Iraq regime. He allegedly amassed a small fortune from fees paid to him for giving newspaper and television interviews in Gulf countries in which he criticized the Iraqi regime and dictator. Another refugee siphoned large sums of money from a Gulf country but reportedly kept most of it. His subterfuge was exposed by another dissident whose assistance he sought in hiding his ill-gained fortune in a numbered Swiss account.

Going west

As mentioned earlier, the prospects of finding financial security was what drove Iraqis to seek asylum in Western countries. They were aware of the potential difficulties and problems inherent in the deep cultural, social and religious differences between them and Westerners but insisted that after considering all advantages and disadvantages it was still the only reasonable choice available to them. Married men saw in it freedom from financial worries and having to abase themselves by borrowing or accepting charity. Young men regarded it as their only opportunity to achieve the financial standard necessary to realize their future plans. They were all eager to point out that the monthly welfare cheque given to a refugee in Western countries exceeded the annual budget of a whole family residing in Syria. The fact that the cost of living in Western countries was many times higher than in Syria or Iran was given little, if any, significance by them. They were also unwilling to give much weight to stories of difficulties in adjusting to host cultures and language barriers from Iraqis who were already living in these countries. In their opinion, dependence on the welfare system of a Western country could not be more humiliating than subsidizing on debt or charity.

During the first few years, almost all refugee claimants depended on welfare payment as their sole or main income. They either put off searching for jobs or despaired of finding any because of language and cultural barriers and lack of skills in demand. Sooner or later, however, most of them realized that the social security payment supported only a subsistence living and that even if they could resist the powerful consumption temptations in an affluent society, their dependents may

be unable to do so. A refugee told me that since his arrival in Canada almost ten years ago the only thing he bought for himself was a heavy winter coat but he must have spent thousands of dollars every year on clothes for his family. Also, another reason that prompted refugees to search for additional sources of income was the flood of requests for financial assistance and loans from their relatives and friends inside and outside Iraq. According to one of them, these relatives and friends were convinced that all refugees in Western countries earned oodles of money and effortlessly.

Many of these refugees dreamt of owning a small business such as a convenience store but lacked the necessary capital to fulfil it. Most of them arrived in these countries with little or no savings, and their social security payments or wages barely covered their current expenses. They envied Iraqi immigrants who left Iraq earlier with their fortunes and succeeded in establishing thriving businesses in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. These refugees also pointed out that they should not be confused with the *bedoons* or stateless persons who resided in Kuwait before the second Gulf war. These unfortunate victims of the war were either barred from returning to Kuwait or new restrictions were put on their residency and many of them subsequently immigrated to Western countries. In fulfillment of their immigration conditions they bought and managed their own businesses.

The most realistic expectation of an Iraqi refugee was to save enough money to buy a used car which he can then operate independently or as part of the fleet of a taxi company. Taxi drivers of Iraqi origin were found in Tehran, Toronto, London, Detroit and New York. Alternatively, a number of them decided to pool their meager savings and resources and bought a small store. It was more likely than not that their combined savings were sufficient only to buy a failing business which they with their little or business experience were unable to turn around as the following case shows:

After my arrival I became a taxi driver. The job was very exhausting so after saving some money I quit the taxi business and joined three other Iraqis in opening a store.

There was no profit in it so we sold it. And I could not find something better than my old job as a taxi driver.

Another partnership ended also because one of the two owners of a convenience store accused his partner of denying him a fair share of

the profits. The acrimonious split left many unresolved issues which required the mediation of other refugees.

The exodus of Iraqi refugees to Western countries coincided with the economic recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s in which Western countries reported relatively high unemployment rates. The refugees' search for employment was made even more difficult by their limited skills and the language and cultural barriers. Some refugees blamed themselves for not making the effort to learn the languages of their host countries or improve their job skills. Many of them were discouraged by the difficulties they experienced in learning English which is the required second language in Iraqi schools. Much of the responsibility for this fell on poorly-designed curriculum and unskilled language teachers in Iraqi schools. Refugee in Scandinavian countries justified their slow progress in learning host languages by arguing that if many years of studying English in Iraqi intermediate and high schools taught them only few words, they would certainly need a longer time to learn these difficult languages.

Refugees were aware that a level of language proficiency was a prerequisite for naturalization in host countries. In Canada, for example, refugees with insufficient language skills failed their citizenship exams and had to wait a whole year before making another attempt. Some refugees were also unwilling or unable because of work or household duties to benefit from opportunities for language and skill training that would enhance their employment chances. When an Iraqi refugee was accepted in a language school in Norway, he was the envy of fellow refugees. He was awarded a five-year scholarship covering fees, boarding and all other expenses. His employment after graduation was also guaranteed. Few months later, his friends were surprised and disappointed to learn that he decided to abandon his study. His justification was judged by one of them to be unconvincing:

It was unbearable. I could no longer study or live with other students. It was a co-educational institute. We had male and female students living together in the dormitory. As you know, these people are unashamedly promiscuous. Female students sat in the laps of their boyfriends in front of everyone and I saw them like this in the library and the cafeteria. I found this extremely offensive and decided to drop out of the school.

The probability of skilled refugees finding gainful employment was much better than graduates, professionals and unskilled workers. A

car mechanic who lived in Iran before immigrating to Canada was able to find suitable work without delay. Few years later, his income from his work and part-time business in selling used cars supported his small family and paid the mortgage on a four-bedroom house in a middle-class neighborhood. Computer specialists were also in great demand. Some of them opted for establishing their own businesses. One of them told me that after graduating from a technical college he turned down several promising job offers in favor of starting his own business. Although he earned less than salaried employees did in his field, he had no regrets because he valued his independence highly. He began by providing computer training and selling computer training software and then downsized to providing computer-based graphic design services. Another computer specialist also chose to open his own computer repair shop but was later forced by low demand for his services to move his business to his home. He later accepted an offer by another Iraqi to relocate his business to a corner in his convenience store.

Many refugees with university qualifications and long experiences were unable to find suitable employment although educational standards in Iraq are relatively high and diplomas from Iraqi educational institutes are internationally recognized. The first hurdle that these refugees encountered was having their diplomas recognized. However, even if their academic qualifications were accepted, not all of these refugees possessed the experience which local employees consider relevant and suitable. A recently landed Iraqi refugee in Canada reported that his job applications were rejected for lack of Canadian experience. He and other refugees regard these conditions as discriminatory and designed solely to exclude new immigrants from the job market. Judging from my own experience, I am inclined to agree with them.

Many high-talent refugees had no choice but to downgrade their employment expectations and accept unskilled jobs and often on temporary basis. An Iraqi refugee who worked as a taxi driver in Toronto made the following comments on the sad plight of professionals and graduates among fellow refugees: "I know several medical doctors, engineers and university graduates who could not find suitable jobs and had to work as taxi drivers or delivering pizzas." One of these unfortunate Iraqis was a university professor with a degree in the sciences from a British university who spent several years teaching at an Iraqi university before accepting an academic position in a

Jordanian university. He later decided to immigrate to Canada in search of better long-term opportunities for himself and his children. Despite his high qualifications and long experience, he failed to find suitable employment. Months after his arrival he was desperate enough to accept a temporary position as an attendant in a petrol station.

After losing hope of working in his field of specialization, an Iraqi engineer started a home-based business selling and installing satellite dishes. When his expectations of high demand for his services among Iraqi and other Arab communities proved to be highly inflated, he decided to shut down his business. "Our business did not succeed," his wife explained, "because Arabs and even fellow Iraqis went to other vendors." They later opened a take-out pizza store. "Every day we woke up at 5:00 a.m. and drove forty five minutes to reach our shop. We worked hard all day long but made little profit". They eventually sold their small family-business at a loss. In view of these cases, the Iraqi artist who rented a small counter in a flea market and made his living from drawing portraits was more fortunate than many skilled refugees who had to accept jobs unrelated to their professions and expertise.

Failure to find suitable employment in one country sometimes drove educated refugees to immigrate to another country. After immigrating from Syria to England, a law professor failed to find employment there and considered leaving to the United States but he later decided to stay after his two daughters found employment and their combined income was enough to support the whole family.

The majority of refugees whom I met were employed in skilled or semi-skilled jobs such as waiters, builders, store attendants and agricultural workers. Many of them found these jobs with the help of other refugees, and some of them worked in stores, restaurant, and small businesses owned by Iraqis or other Arabs. A Canadian farmer of Egyptian origin expressed his satisfaction with the performance of two Iraqis whom he employed as temporary workers during summer. The manager of a store who originally came from Iraq hired mainly Iraqi refugees as part-time attendants.

Tribal Iraqis consider all manual work except farming and herding to be degrading and fit only for non-tribal outcasts. They refuse to befriend or intermarry with persons performing certain manual work such as weaving and even forbid their children to play with their children. Although these social customs have somewhat weakened as

a result of increased education, urbanization and modernization, attitudes toward manual labor are still negative. However, such complaint was not heard from Iraqi refugees working in manual jobs. Indeed, one of them employed as a waiter in a Norwegian restaurant expressed satisfaction with his work and earning an income from his labor. Another refugee who was similarly proud of his tribal roots did not object to his work as a store attendant but he was unhappy with some of his duties and the attitudes and behavior of some of his customers. What he hated most about his job was selling lottery tickets and bacon which contradict his religious beliefs. During a visit to him at his place of work, he did not show his disapproval of customers who came to buy lottery tickets and greeted them with a smile and the words of greeting specified in the store's manual. Selling pork products was apparently more disagreeable and required from him delicate handling and maneuvering to avoid unnecessary contact with the religiously unclean product. All the official guidelines on greeting customers were forgotten when he saw a customer placing a packet of bacon on the counter; instead of the mandatory smile there was a deep frown. Although the bacon was inside a thick plastic wrapping, his fingers hovered over it for many seconds searching for a corner far from the meat. Finally, he picked it delicately with two fingers and dropped it in a plastic bag, muttering angrily to himself. "The things we have to endure just to survive in this country," he said to me. He also complained about the women who came into his store in their cut T-shirts and shorts late at night and stayed longer than necessary to chat about their ex-boyfriends. He told me that he was unprepared when a woman customer entered the store and ordered a packet of condoms and described his shock and uneasiness at her casual demeanor. According to him, night robberies were a common hazard for storeowners and attendants in this city but he considered himself lucky to have been robbed only once.

We have strict orders not to make any resistance in the case of a hold-up. Anyhow, most of the money is deposited in a safe so the thieves did not take much. After the robbers left the shop with the money, I did what they instructed me to do. I blew in this whistle, which I was told to wear around my neck. It is not really a whistle but it looks like one. It is somehow connected to an alarm in the police station. Minutes later, they arrived but it was too late. The robbers

were already gone. I felt bad because this store was entrusted to me and I failed to protect it from the robbers.

Few months later he told me about another incident in the shop involving a shoplifter. A young man entered the shop and then brazenly walked down the aisles, picking merchandise from the shelves and putting them in the large pockets of his parka. He added that he did not lose his temper until the insolent shoplifter started swearing at him.

I came from behind my counter in a hurry, caught him by surprise and I hit him hard on the head. He fell down, got up and I threw a case of soft drinks at him. It missed him by inches. Then he ran out of the store. I chased him across the parking lot of the plaza, down the main street and did not stop until he disappeared into a side street.

Living on welfare

Refugees generally found it easier to justify falling back on welfare pay after trying unsuccessfully to find employment or losing their jobs. They recalled the story of a fellow refugee who exhausted all his resources before applying for assistance. Another refugee believed that he had a right to this assistance because European nations colonized Arab countries and exploited their population and resources. "We have a right to this money because it was taken away from our fathers and grandfathers," he told another refugee. What all refugees agreed on disliking about dependence on welfare were some of the measures taken in some countries to combat welfare frauds. In Canada for example, social welfare administrators pay visits to the residences of welfare recipients to ascertain their eligibility for further help. Refugees claimed that during these visits, inspectors usually checked their bank statements and wardrobes. "They come and visit our apartment to check if we deserve social welfare payment or not," one refugee complained. "If they notice something newly bought such as a television set or dress, they ask us questions about it to find out if we have another income. It is humiliating."

Refugees generally do not report additional income from investment or pay from temporary work. They justified this by claiming that welfare pay is insufficient to cover all their essential expenses. These claims were true in most cases. To illustrate, a reduction in welfare pay coupled with a rising cost of living significantly lowered the living

standard of Iraqi refugees and exiles in Canada in the late 1990s. In spite of these mitigating circumstances, refugees did not find all cases of welfare fraud morally, and thus legally, justified. An example of this was the owner of a convenience store who was accused by his previous partner of taking welfare assistance undeservedly. Refugees also disapproved of married couples who obtained a divorce on paper in order to apply for separate welfare assistance.

Another method for defrauding the welfare system was by claiming medical disability. A refugee who was medically certified of having a permanent disability is entitled to full assistance and henceforth is not subjected to home inspection by welfare employees. The authenticity of a claim of disability for the reason of depression or other psychological conditions submitted by a refugee was usually questioned by fellow refugees although many of them complained of high stress, despair and other psychological and emotional problems. Incidentally, many Iraqis living under the brutal authority of the regime in power often used this claim as grounds for exemption from active military service.

One tragic story involving welfare fraud began with a refugee claiming that he suffered from chronic depression. After obtaining a medical report confirming that, he applied for permanent disability status and his request was subsequently granted. However, he was told that he was not entitled to social welfare payment since his wife was healthy and could work and support both of them and their children. His wife then submitted a similar application for permanent disability status, probably at her husband's request, and her disability was officially confirmed. They were then both certified as psychologically disable and thus entitled to the disability pay which was slightly higher than welfare pay. A short time later, employees from the social services department in their city came to their home and took away their children. They told them that since both he and his wife are unfit to take care of their children, they intend to put them in foster care. The couple were devastated.

An attempt to defraud the welfare authorities in two European countries was also discovered but the culprits, unlike the Iraqi couple who lost their children, suffered only a reprimand from the authorities and the derision of fellow refugees:

She traveled to Denmark on a visitor's visa to see her married daughter and son-in-law who were granted asylum recently. She found life in the country more agreeable and

decided to live there. After going back to Iraq for a short visit, she came back and applied for asylum. According to her relatives, she did not deserve a refugee status because she had no political activities and did not belong to an Iraqi ethnic or religious group discriminated against by the regime. Anyhow, the Danish immigration authorities approved her application. She had been living in Denmark for over a year when she heard about the scheme devised by some refugees to receive two instead of one welfare cheque. These refugees intended to travel to neighboring Sweden where they would apply for asylum and if granted become eligible for welfare pay from Sweden as well. She recklessly decided to go with them. It appeared that the Swedish authorities were alerted to their scheme because she and her accomplices were apprehended at the point of entry to Sweden and subsequently deported.

Criminal activities among refugees were rare. Refugees who reported some of these crimes emphasized that their perpetrators were not genuine refugees but convicts who were set free during the uprising in Iraq. They recalled the case of an Iraqi refugee who died after jumping from the window of his apartment to avoid capture by the police on suspicions of drug trafficking. Another story was about a gang of refugees, which shoplifted from electronic stores in Norway. A member of the gang distracted the salesmen while the others carried away a television set or other small appliances. An Iraqi refugee who worked as a part-time store attendant described his shock and sadness when he saw another refugee shop-lifting a camera from the store.

Some refugees did not consider some infringements of the law to be serious. An example of these petty violations was defrauding telephone companies of charges for long-distance calls or cable companies of their subscription fees. Nevertheless, Iraqi refugees in general are law-abiding persons and scorn those who tarnish their reputation by violating the laws of their host countries.

Chapter Five: Adapting to Host Cultures: “Madam, It Feels Like 120 Years”

Iraqi refugees believed that while obtaining asylum in Western countries solved some of their pressing problems it replaced them with new ones. On the advantage side, it undoubtedly removed existing or potential threats to their lives and freedom and eased their financial problems. However, living in these countries presented them with the formidable task of rebuilding their social lives within a different social and cultural environment. The extent of adjustment or adaptation made to the host culture varied with the cultural distance separating the Iraqi culture from the host culture and the strength of the refugee's personal values. Common cultural and religious values and customs made it easier for an Iraqi to make his home in Syria or Iran than in a Western country. Also, refugees with an urban, middle-class background faced fewer problems in adapting to Western cultures than those from rural, traditional communities. The stories in this chapter describe the efforts of these refugees to preserve their cultural identity and the problems and obstacles encountered by them in this regard.

Safeguarding traditional values

Iraqi refugees carried with them the values and customs of their society and culture. Iraqi culture is an amalgam of the traditional and modern. Religion, tribe and the family which are the major forces of tradition have been weakened or modified by modern education, urbanization and industrialization. The influences of both traditional and modernizing forces are reflected in a variety of attitudes and behaviors. For example, observance of some tribal values and customs has declined but tribal loyalties are still strong in rural areas. The influence of religion in Middle Eastern societies including Iraq appears to be cyclical and it is presently at a high point. However, the forces of change and modernization led many to question the validity of conservative interpretations of some religious principles. Family loyalties and ties remain strong but roles within the family, which prevailed for centuries, are undergoing change and modification.

Individuals still learn their basic values and customs from their families but exercise higher degrees of personal choice in implementing these traditions. Strong family ties continue to define and shape the roles, duties and responsibilities of family members but these ties are now largely limited to the nuclear family. Social and family background also determines the individual's social status and significantly influences his career prospects but personal qualifications and achievements have an equal, if not sometimes greater, impact. In these close-knit families, final authority remains at least nominally with the father or male head of the family but other members are exercising a greater influence on decision making. The extent of freedom of choice allowed members of a family varies widely. In traditional families, fathers still make all major decisions regarding family finances and the careers and marriages of their sons and daughters. Sharing common financial interests such as a family-owned and managed farm or business concern usually strengthens these ties and mutual responsibilities. In contrast, urban and educated families tend to be more egalitarian.

In order to win social approval and respect, individuals are expected to socialize with family members, visit them regularly and help them. Relatives are still encouraged to visit each other on religious feasts, and to attend wedding celebrations and burial services of family members. Strong family connections can also help an individual in furthering his personal interests and in warding off threats and dangers. Relatives still play a major role in arranging marriages, finding jobs, securing a promotion and obtaining preferential treatment or prompt services from a public agency. When a family member is arrested, the help of a relative who has influence or knows someone with influence is usually sought before hiring a lawyer.

Friends are also expected to extend all kinds of support and help to each other. A large network of friends may be as important as strong family ties in helping an individual to achieve his personal objectives. Having friends also satisfy a basic need; Iraqis are gregarious people and enjoy making friends and socializing with them. The high value placed by these people on generosity is indicative of their sociable nature. In rural areas, each tribe, clan or family has one or more *mudhaif* or guesthouse, which is a distinctively beautiful structure made of reed and palm branches. It serves as a meeting place for all adult males of the tribe or clan and for receiving and entertaining their guests. Urban centers have coffeehouses where men congregate and meet with friends, neighbors, and work colleagues to chat, gossip,

discuss current issues and spend some idle time playing chess, backgammon or dominoes. Middle class families join clubs and entertain at home. It is also the custom among urban housewives to host regular matinee tea parties known as *qubool*, for female friends and neighbors. Iraqi bureaucrats are frequently criticized for neglecting their duties and wasting paid time on receiving friends, making personal telephone calls to friends and relatives, socializing with colleagues, and even holding office parties during work hours.

Iraqi refugees carried with them their cherished values, customs and ethical codes. Adhering to these values and maintaining their customs were easier for refugees living in Arab and Muslim countries than those in Western countries. Values and customs in Syria, Iran and Jordan are identical or similar to those in Iraq. Refugees, however, identified subtle subcultural differences between themselves and their Syrian or Iranian hosts. In contrast, newcomers to Sweden, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States experienced cultural shock in the beginning. Even after spending many years and becoming naturalized, some of them still complained of their inability to understand or accept Western attitudes and behaviors.

Living within a different culture

Refugees did not report major difficulties in adjusting to social and cultural conditions in countries bordering Iraq. Family ties in these host societies are strong; loyalty, affection and mutual duties and responsibilities bind family members to each other. The modal Syrian or Iranian father has the same role, authorities, duties and responsibilities of an Iraqi father. Differences in social roles are marginal and reflect personal convictions and choices rather than genuine cultural differences. For example, an Iraqi man walking few steps head of his hijab-wearing wife would not be considered odd or out-of-place in the Syrian city of al-Saida or Qum in Iran. Children in all three cultures, or subcultures, are expected to respect and obey their parents. Social and religious values concerning illicit sexual relations and consumption of intoxicants are the same. Nonconformity to social and cultural norms results in ostracism and loss of social status in all of them.

The situation in Western countries is drastically different. It is far more difficult for Iraqi refugees living in these countries to preserve

their cherished values and customs since these are not locally supported. Sharp differences regarding parental authority, the role of women and sexual freedom were major critical issues facing Iraqi refugees in these countries. Refugees were deeply worried about the undesirable Western influences over the attitudes and behavior of members of their families. They did their best to keep out these influences by minimizing social contacts with their hosts to the extent of isolation in most cases. In their statements and discussions of their relationship with their hosts, refugees emphasized differences in identities and culture between themselves and their hosts. 'We' or 'us' used by a refugee did not necessarily signified a sense of solidarity among refugees but served to underline distinctions and separation from their hosts who were referred to as 'they' or 'them'. This was clearly illustrated by the following comment made by one refugee on a local story involving a member of the host society: "I am not concerned by what happened to him. He is not one of us." Another refugee used the same distinction to explain differences in attitudes and behavior: "The twain will never meet. They are materialistic and we are spiritualist."

Iraqi refugees in Western countries expressed their distinct cultural identity by conforming to their religious dress codes, observing religious practices and rituals and running their household in accordance with their values and customs. Many refugees observe their religious duties of prayer and fasting, attend Friday prayers in mosques and husaynias, and visit each other on feasts and social occasions. They also buy their *halal* meat and other food products from groceries owned by Iraqis, Arabs or Muslims. They usually eat at home and housewives prepare mostly traditional Iraqi dishes or other Middle Eastern dishes learned from Arab neighbors or friends. Female members of many Iraqi families usually wear the Islamic hijab while Iraqi men do not shave their beards in conformity with religious traditions. In a Detroit suburb with a relatively high concentration of Iraqi refugees, men go out in public wearing their traditional costumes including an aba and a head cover.

Group solidarity is also important for Iraqi refugees who feel that their value system is threatened by Western values and customs. They typically prefer to live in neighborhoods where other refugees and people of Arabic origin live. Such neighborhoods offer men, women and children more opportunities for social interaction, making friends and combating feelings of loneliness and homesickness. In Toronto,

the commercial and industrial capital of Canada, many Iraqi refugees live in high-rise apartment buildings in Scarborough where a large number of immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries also reside. Men and women attending religious services in mosques and husaynias meet, make friends and socialize with other refugees and immigrants of the same sex.

Information about changing roles and authorities within families of refugees living in Western countries are sparse because these are considered private and personal matters which are not usually revealed or discussed with other than close family members. Contacts with a small number of refugee families indicated that some changes in roles and behaviors were occurring. Fathers in general are more willing to involve their wives and older children in decisions on household issues. Social visits are frequently mixed and women wearing their traditional Islamic dress participate in discussions and express their opinions in such meetings. Most women are allowed, or even encouraged, to learn how to drive, obtain a driver's license, do the household shopping, attend language schools and perform other duties usually undertaken by men in an Iraqi traditional community. Women also exercise a greater degree of influence over family matters. A young Iraqi father of two small children admitted that his wife's insistence on raising their children in an Arab and Muslim social environment prompted him to consider looking for work in oil-rich Gulf countries. Another housewife boldly confronted her husband with her wish to go back to Iran where she led a happier life close to her family and relatives. Increased education and liberal interpretations of religious teachings may have influenced the changing role of women in the refugee household more than exposure to Western culture. These changes have accommodated many of the demands of life in a Western culture without sacrificing basic religious and cultural values.

Marriages made in exile not heaven

Iraqi parents whether living inside or outside Iraq worry more about the future of their daughters than that of their sons. These worries end or abate only when they are married. An Iraqi mother living in Toronto wished that Iraqis would imitate immigrants of Egyptian origin who have social clubs solely for the purpose of arranging marriages for their sons and daughters. Finding suitable marriage partners in a small

community is difficult, and political, social and religious differences and rivalries further compound the difficulty. A father admitted that he would not hesitate to give his daughter in marriage to the first eligible person who proposed. In 1999, serious charges were filed by the police in an American city against the father of two underage girls and their prospective husbands. According to news reports, the Iraqi father had consented to give his underage daughters in marriage to the two Iraqi men

Iraqi parents living in the West consider themselves fortunate if someone proposed to their daughters. Traditional young Iraqis prefer to marry girls who have never left Iraq or Arab girls from countries such as Syria and Lebanon. They believe that these girls are more likely to be chaste and are more prepared to accept the traditional role of a housewife and mother. Several Iraqi refugees from European countries travel every summer to Syria to look for suitable brides. Others go to Amman in Jordan to await the arrival of their brides from Iraq. After divorcing his Iraqi wife whom he met in Syria, an Iraqi asked his relatives in Iraq to choose a bride for him. He later met his prospective wife and in-laws at the Syrian-Jordanian border, paid her parents the dowry agreed upon previously and took his wife back to Damascus. Such preferences are not exclusive to Iraqi refugees who left their country recently: an Iraqi university professor who lived and taught in the United States for over twenty years also sought the help of his relatives in Iraq in finding a suitable wife for him. Although refugees admit that this traditional matchmaking may not always result in a happy marriage, they consider it a safer choice than marrying an Iraqi girl living in the West who has been exposed to its corrupting influences.

Polygamy is still practiced among refugees living in counties bordering Iraq but this custom is becoming very uncommon. In Syria, only few cases of polygamy among refugees came to my attention. It is practically unheard of among refugees in Western countries. One refugee told me that legal and financial obstacles are frustrating his attempt to obtain refugee status for his first wife and children. In another case, the desperate wife of an Iraqi refugee living in a European country not only acquiesced to his wish to marry a second wife but also gave him a fake divorce on paper so that he can carry out his scheme. Shortly after his return from Syria with his young bride, he was apprehended and charged with polygamy.

A number of refugees, like Omran whose story was told in the first chapter of this book, had to leave their wives behind them in Iraq. Some of these men who were used to family life remarried after giving up on smuggling their wives and children out of Iraq. They usually blame the Iraqi regime and its policies for putting them in this situation. One Iraqi refugee who was surprised to discover one day that he had two wives instead of one probably shared this sentiment. Another refugee related his story to me:

He was a devoted husband and never thought of marrying a second wife. One day his wife became ill and he took her to a doctor. After several tests, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. They were also told that the cancer was in its advanced stage and she had only few weeks to live. This saddened the man immensely and although he wanted to be near his wife during her last days, he had to accede to her wish of spending the little time she had left with her parents in Iraq. Two years went by in which the man heard nothing about the fate of his wife. He assumed that she must have been long dead and began to think of remarrying. Few months after taking another wife, his doorbell rang and he went to answer it. You can imagine his surprise when he saw standing in front of him none other than his first wife. She told him that the Iraqi doctors who examined her told her that what she had was a common case of fibroids and not cancer. What kept her from returning or contacting him was the regime.

Cases of marital discord among refugees were often blamed on Western influences and the failure of the couples involved to deal with them wisely. For example, these influences were believed to have led a wife to leave her refugee husband for another man. According to the refugee who reported this incident, this wife was emboldened by Western values to act 'irrationally' and break up her marriage and disgracing herself and her family. In the following case the atmosphere of freedom in Denmark may have encouraged an Iraqi refugee to file for divorce but later withdrew her application because of Danish laws:

Marriage between cousins is the norm among tribal and other traditional Iraqis. According to this custom, a girl's father must first obtain the permission of her cousins before accepting a marriage proposal from a distant relative or a stranger. They were second cousins and both of them were

refugees, but they were not exactly compatible. She was a university graduate in her mid-twenties and never wore the Islamic hijab before in her life. He was an ex-prisoner of war freed by Iranian authorities and was living in Iran on an allowance from his rich brother. He was a mild-mannered religious person. At first, she rejected his marriage proposal but later gave her consent. A short time after their first daughter was born, they flew to Denmark and applied for asylum. Few years later, she surprised all her relatives by asking for divorce. She resisted all attempts by them to mend bridges with her husband and submitted an official application for divorce. The Danish authorities rejected her application for lack of an admissible cause such as spousal abuse or adultery. Faced with the possibility of losing her financial assistance as a refugee claimant if she insisted on divorcing her husband, she finally relented and returned to him.

Parents not patriarchs

Parental authority in the refugee household was generally weakened or modified by Western standards. It was the general consensus that raising children in accordance with traditional values and customs was the most difficult task facing refugees in Western countries. Desperate parents who worried about the 'corrupting' impact of Western society and media on their children resorted to various measures ranging from purchasing satellite dishes which feature Arabic channels only to leaving their countries of refuge to reside temporarily or permanently in an Arab or Muslim country. When it was suggested to a refugee that the quality of programming in Arab satellite channels was inferior and their messages sometimes contradicted our cultural and religious principles, he replied: "At least they will listen to people speaking in Arabic and may occasionally hear the Adhan, i.e. the prayer call, and see people praying." Others, however, found such attempts by parents to insulate their children from environmental influences to be excessive and ineffective. "You can control what the children see on television but you cannot control what they see, hear, and read in schools," said one Iraqi exile living in Canada. According

to him also, high schools were the worst enemies of traditional parents because in them children learned from the school staff and their peers to become rebellious and to defy parental authority. Refugees were shocked and horrified by the curricula of some of the classes at their children's schools. They were convinced that teaching their children facts about sexual intercourse, AIDS, homosexuality and the use of condoms at school encouraged them to indulge in premature and illicit sexual relations. Even parents who did not believe in corporal punishment regarded legal restrictions imposed on disciplining children an unacceptable encroachment on their parental authority. They bitterly complained about teachers encouraging children to inform them about any such incidents at home. They were also troubled by stories of children taken away from their parents and homes by social workers and put in foster care where they could be exposed to undesirable Western customs and converted to Christianity. Although none spoke about his own experiences, there were several references to problems experienced by other refugees. A refugee recalled the story of an Iraqi girl in the United States who was discovered drinking beer with a group of boys. Interestingly, the same story was told about a girl in Norway:

An Iraqi refugee was walking down a street when he saw the familiar face of a friend's daughter. As he stopped to ask her about her parents, he noticed she was acting strangely. She fidgeted and hid one hand behind her back. He then noticed that she was holding a can of beer and not far from her a group of boys stood watching them and drinking beer also.

According to traditional Iraqi values and customs, a family's honor and social standing depend primarily on the proper conduct of its female members. A daughter could damage the reputation of her family beyond repair by indulging in illicit sexual affairs, drinking alcohol or abusing drugs. Although few were willing to discuss it openly, Iraqi parents in Western countries lived in constant fear of this possibility. A father was moved by his worries over the undesirable influence of Western culture over his children to consider leaving Denmark where he was granted asylum and settling down in Syria instead. One of his friends described his dilemma to me: "He came back to Damascus to study the situation. I took him around to a number of real estate agents then we visited few private schools to inquire about the fees. He could not make up his mind because he could not afford to lose his welfare

pay". After becoming a Canadian citizen, another refugee moved his family back to Syria "so that they learn proper Muslim values and Arab customs and language". Such concerns were not, however, high in the thinking of a middle-class mother. As mentioned earlier, middle-class urban Iraqis tend to be more modernized. This mother said that she trusted her daughter's good judgment enough to allow her to choose her own female friends and even to stay overnight in their houses.

Not all refugees however could afford to relocate to Syria and sacrifice their social welfare pay or jobs. They would prefer instead to enroll their children in private Muslim schools which adhered to religious principles and included religious courses in their curricula. However, there were not enough schools to accommodate all their children and the fees of existing schools were beyond the means of the average refugee. An Iraqi refugee living in Toronto where a large Muslim population lived complained that they have several mosques and husaynias but only two full schools. Although he preferred to put his children in Shia schools, its fees, amounting to approximately \$300 US per month, were prohibitive and, furthermore, it was located in a remote area of the city.

Family solidarity

Traditional values and customs also dictate that family members must maintain contacts with each other and support each other financially and otherwise. With one exception, all cases that have come to my attention indicated that refugees still adhered to this value. One Iraqi refugee told me that he remitted thousands of dollars to his family and relatives in Iraqi and abroad every year and will continue to do so although he needed the money to purchase a house. Another refugee was reportedly working as a manual laborer in a European country to support the education of his brother in a Syrian university. A third refugee revealed that he often withdrew cash on his credit card to support his relatives including a brother whom he accused of abusing his generosity. When an Iraqi refugee failed to financially support his less fortunate relatives, his conduct was strongly denounced as the following dialogue between two refugees, one living in Syria and the other in Denmark, showed:

A refugee residing in Syria complained that his brother in Denmark used to send him some money regularly but he

recently stopped. A refugee who lived in Denmark and knew this brother said that he saw him frequently and on more than one occasion advised him to help his needy elder brother in Syria.

Social interactions among refugees

The following story recalled by a refugee showed how strong attachment to their home country, traditional group and family made their homesickness even more intense and painful:

Almost every year my father used to go to Lebanon. One year he took me with him. I did not really enjoy that summer in the Lebanese mountain resort. I was a teenager and the age difference between us was close to fifty years. Almost every morning he insisted on going down to Beirut. Other tourists of his age at our hotel spent the mornings reading or relaxing but he wanted to go to the traffic jams and humid hot weather of Beirut. The worst part of it was spending most of the time in this café. If it was one of the elegant cafes of al-Hamra Street or the sea front I would not have minded but this was a dingy café occupying the narrow entrance of an old building. It was close enough to the main fish and vegetables market in the capital to hear clearly the calls of the vendors and smell the odors of their merchandise. About ten tiny tables and twenty uncomfortable wicker chairs squeezed against the walls of the entrance left just enough space for the willowy owner-waiter to move back and forth. Later on, I realized that my father enjoyed sitting in this café because its stuffy atmosphere and mainly Iraqi clientele reminded him of home. It was homesickness – pure and simple.

Refugees like this Iraqi tourist suffered from homesickness but unlike him and most immigrants from other nations, they were unable to return to their country for fear of official reprisals. Consequently, they sought relief of this feeling through socializing with fellow Iraqis and their Arab hosts or Arab immigrants in Western countries.

Iraqi refugees living in countries bordering Iraq generally enjoyed a better social life and more contacts with other refugees than those in Western countries. Several refugees living in Canada for example

complained that they did not see each other often because everyone was working full time to earn a living or augment his welfare pay. It was interesting to hear refugees in Syria or Iran complaining about their feelings of homesickness and loneliness but after arriving in Canada or Denmark they lamented the good old days in al-Saida or Qom where they had more friends and socialized more frequently. One refugee living in a Western country best depicted the mood of these refugees in the following statement, which was used as the subtitle for this chapter: "Madam!" he said addressing the host of a satellite television program over the telephone. "I have lived here for twelve years but it feels like 120 years."

Refugees also found other valuable benefits in associating with fellow Iraqi refugees. New arrivals relied on those who came before them for assistance, information and advice on a wide range of issues such as applying for welfare payment, finding an accommodation, and passing the drivers' license test. Some Iraqis undoubtedly went out of their way to help new arrivals. They provided them with information and valuable advice on accommodation, employment, education and so on. Some of them devoted many hours of their time in driving newcomers to shopping malls and helping them in purchasing furniture, heavy winter clothes and groceries. Shortly after my arrival in Canada, a refugee claimant who was a complete stranger to me until then visited me at my rented house to offer his help and a generous gift of several pounds of halal meat. An Iraqi exile living in the United Kingdom collected donations to help Iraqi students who became refugees after refusing to return to Iraq.

The whole process by which a refugee asked for and received help from other refugees was informal and personal. This explains why refugees did not have associations for helping new arrivals or other forms of self-help. A new refugee usually arrived in the country of destination with a list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of relatives, friends or persons known to his relatives or friends whom he could contact and ask for help. This information was kept hidden from immigration officials who if made known to them may ask one of his relatives or friends to accommodate him instead of paying for his accommodation. Shortly after his arrival, a refugee contacted persons on his list. One or more of them would feel obliged to act the role of a host to the new refugee and provide him with the hospitality and assistance traditionally accorded to a guest. A refugee who had no one to contact would often visit Iraqi husaynias in the hope of meeting other

refugees willing to help him. The host refugee in this relationship was motivated by the prospects of earning the social prestige associated with observing cherished traditional values and the heavenly reward promised for acts of charity and service. Canadian immigration officials overwhelmed by the sudden arrival of a group of new Iraqi refugees contacted several husaynias and mosques to secure help for them. According to the newspaper report, mosques and husaynias run by refugees and exiles of Iraqi origin declined to give assistance.

While refugees are generally helpful to each other there was among them the exception who looked after his own interests only as the following story shows:

The social services department invited us to a meeting to discuss our needs. We were a group of several families. One of the refugees present on that day advised us not to irritate the officials with whom we were meeting and risk losing their goodwill and cooperation by making too many demands. Regrettably, we believed him. During the meeting, they asked us first if we had any requests and we, my wife and I, said no. Other refugees also said the same thing—except the refugee who advised us to do that. After we all said no, it was his turn and we sat and listened in disbelief as he and his wife made a long list of requests.

Divided loyalties

After giving him some advice on buying a used car, a taxi driver of East European origin working in Toronto told an Iraqi refugee: “if you need help don’t ask strangers go to your people!” Iraqis are a heterogeneous people who profess different ethnic, religious, sectarian and tribal loyalties. These loyalties also affect their social interactions and associations. Thus, a Shia refugee is more likely to associate with refugees who share his sectarian affiliation. Within this same general group, tribal and political affiliation may influence a refugee’s choice of friends and associates. On his first visit to the local husaynia, a new arrival was queried about his tribal origin and was then put in contact with a member of his tribe. If a refugee needed advice or help, he should go first to his relatives and members of his tribe as one new refugee learned. Shortly after his arrival in Syria, another refugee told him: “I would like to help you in finding work in one of the Gulf

states but why doesn't your cousin – who has many contacts – help you? I am afraid that if I help you, your cousin will be angry with me.”

Refugees and exiles from urban centers generally shunned refugees of tribal origin and preferred to associate with each other. When a refugee used the label ‘Rafha people’ to refer to those who came from the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, this would indicate that he is probably of urban origin and thus believed himself, like other urban Iraqis, to be distinct from and superior to those refugees who are mainly from the rural south. Refugees and exiles of urban origin mostly belonged to the professional and educated secular middle class. They were unlikely to be found in the company of rural people because they did not regularly attend religious functions in mosques or husaynias and regarded sitting in coffeehouses to be a low-class custom.

Social interactions among refugees were constrained not only by traditional affiliations and loyalties characteristic of the Iraqi society but also by their psychological states of mind resulting from living under an oppressive regime. Many Iraqis believe that social relations and interactions among them were adversely impacted by policies of the ruling regime. They blamed in specific the regime's omnipresent security system which employed a vast number of security agents and encourages party members to spy and inform on Iraqis. Iraqis living inside and outside their country believed that these agents and informers were everywhere and consequently viewed and treated strangers with suspicion. Refugees feared that reports prepared by these agents would lead to reprisals against their close relatives in Iraq. This fear prompted an Iraqi refugee who was currently living in the United Kingdom to persistently avoid any contact with other refugees including relatives and friends for over fifteen years.

Iraqi refugees also suspected that a number of them worked as secret agents for their host countries. One refugee described his shock when he unintentionally glimpsed the contents of the identity card of a fellow refugee standing in front of him in a queue and found that he worked for the security agency of their host country. Available evidence indicated that the security agencies of some Western countries also recruited a number of Iraqi refugees to spy on other refugees. Recently, fourteen Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Canada claimed that they were pressured by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service or CSIS to work as informers in exchange for granting them landed immigrant status. Confirmation for such allegations came from another Iraqi who told me that he recently met with security agents of this agency and

gave them information about the activities of refugees who belonged to a splinter communist organization.

When a long friendship between two men suddenly ended, Iraqis frequently suspected their wives to be behind it. Wives angry with their husbands for neglecting them in favor of their male friends sometime conspired against such friendships. Iraqis knew of cases in which personal rivalries, differences and petty jealousies marred social relations. One of these cases was the failure of a group of middle-class Iraqi graduates and professionals living in Toronto to form a club of their own. According to one source, prospective members managed to meet just once. Another case involved several affluent families in another neighborhood of the same city. A young member of one of these families described relations among them in the following brief sentence: "They were constantly bickering and squabbling among themselves." Such cases lent credence to the widely held belief among Iraqi refugees that it was difficult if not impossible for them to put aside their personal, social, political, religious and sectarian differences and socialize with each other harmoniously and form associations to represent and defend their interests.

Patterns of interactions among refugees

In spite of these discouraging factors, many Iraqi refugees socialized with each other. They did this mainly at homes, husaynias, and cafes. Exchanging regular home visits was an indication of the closeness of the relationship between two refugees. Such visits allowed a greater degree of socialization between all members of the two families. It was an opportunity for their wives to know each other better and for the children to play together. A refugee told me that his family enjoyed going on picnics with families of other Iraqi refugees; "We took a portable grill, plenty of steaks and other food and headed for a park where we spent all day." Refugees believed that such contacts were essential to maintain their cherished values. According to one refugee, socializing with like-minded refugees helped members of his family, and especially his children, to strengthen their commitment to their cultural identity and adherence to their religious values.

Another favorite meeting place for Iraqi refugees belonging to the Shia sect is the husaynia. On Fridays and religious occasions, Iraqis

flock to the nearest husaynia to perform prayers and other religious duties. Annual religious events such as the Ashura and Ramadan send larger crowds of men, women and children to husaynias where they can observe religious rituals, meet old friends and acquaintances and make new friendships. These visits may be invaluable for many Iraqi women who are deprived of other opportunities for socializing. One refugee, however, told me that he forbade his wife from going to the husaynia because women there indulged in slandering and gossiping which led to discord among Iraqi men.

Spending hours in a coffeehouse was for many old and middle-aged Iraqi refugees an integral part of their daily routines and an important medium for satisfying some of their social needs. In countries bordering Iraq, coffeehouses provided refugees with opportunities for socializing with other refugees. In al-Saida, Iraqi refugees had their own coffeehouses in which they met, chatted, read newspapers and sipped traditional Iraqi drinks. An Iraqi refugee living in the United Kingdom told his relatives in Syria that he very much missed his daily visits to the coffeehouse. Many refugees in North America, Europe and Australia probably shared his sentiment.

These limited channels and opportunities for social interactions were insufficient to compensate some Iraqis for the absence of traditional support from their family and friends to which they grew accustomed to in their country. This situation left some with strong feelings of homesickness, loneliness and despair. A small sample of eighteen refugees to whom the author administered a pilot questionnaire in 1995 unanimously assigned an item describing loneliness away from relatives and friends first rank among eight items listing different problems faced by refugees. When these respondents were also asked to indicate whom they would approach for help if faced with a thorny problem, most of them said they would go to relatives, friends or both. None indicated that he would seek the help of a local person and one said that he had none but Allah to help him. The lack of family and peer support made it impossible for Omran, the main character in our first tragic story, to exorcise the voices of suspicion and doubt which led him to stab his wife to death in front of their daughter. For the same reason, an Iraqi father living in Jordan killed his children and committed suicide by hanging himself. Social isolation may also be one of the reasons behind several suicide cases among refugees including at least two in Canada. The following obituary of one of the Iraqis who

committed suicide in Canada in 1997 was published in a local Arabic-language newspaper:

J. was thirty nine years old. He used to live in Baghdad. He left Iraq in 1985 to live in Iran. In 1985 he was granted asylum in Canada. He recently became depressed after news of his family and friends became scarce. He was living in Hamilton when he committed suicide.

Socializing with the neighbors

Refugees generally tended to interact more frequently and more closely with other Iraqis than with local people in their host countries. Interactions with locals varied depending on cultural distance. Common cultural and religious values and traditions encouraged and sustained greater contacts with Syrians or Iranians than with Western nationals. Limited interactions with Westerners rarely occurred for other than formal and business purposes. Many Iraqis living in Syria, Jordan and Iran had local friends and acquaintances. These friendship bonds usually developed between business partners, students, colleagues and neighbors.

In the case of Iran, common sectarian affiliation and strong opposition to the Ba'th regime in Iraq supported cordial relations between Iraqi refugees and their Iranian hosts. The testimony of one refugee confirmed this: "Iranians were very friendly toward us. Few of them gave me their seats in buses when they knew that I was an Iraqi refugee." Some Iraqis, however, felt that relations were not always friendly and blamed this on their hosts whom they accused of harboring prejudices against them. A young Iraqi who spent all of his childhood in an Iranian school for the handicapped told me that he sadly remembered his school mates taunting him with the Farsi words 'Arabs biro' which mean out with the Arabs. One refugee who lived for almost a decade in Iran ascribed these ill feelings to the vicious war waged by the Iraqi regime on Iran:

I had a car and a nice house in a respectable middle class neighborhood. My income was sufficient to support my family and there was enough left for some luxuries such as an American-made car. Everyone treated us nicely except my next door neighbor. She was a widower who had lost two of her sons in the Iraq-Iran war. She knew that we were

Iraqis and resented us. One day I found all the tires in my car with the air left out of them. I was certain it was her doing but chose to ignore it. Soon after, I discovered a small dent in my car. When I confronted her with my suspicion, she did not deny it, and said: “why is it that someone like you has a car while I, the mother of two martyrs, has none.” When another matriarch living in the same neighborhood learned about this incident she went to the widower and scolded her by telling her that her sons, the martyrs, “must be turning in their graves because of their mother’s unfriendly conduct”. The widower never bothered us again.

The same refugee acknowledged that some of the blame for the tension in relations fell on unruly Iraqi refugees. Some Iraqis, he observed, misbehaved toward their hosts: “Some young Iraqis behaved shamelessly. There were reports of Iraqis abandoning their Iranian wives and seeking asylum elsewhere”. According to one refugee, Iraqis sometimes behaved rudely to their hosts and confessed that he himself did this once:

I was walking in a hurry to attend an important meeting. But the street was crowded that day and I had to thread my way through the crowd. Suddenly this man crossed my path and I couldn’t avoid bumping into him. I apologized to him and he accepted my apology. But he got hold of my sleeve and wouldn’t let go. He then started lecturing me on the virtue of patience. He was very polite but I didn’t have the time to waste on listening to his sermon. After all I am a cleric myself. I begged him to let go of my arm so that I won’t miss my appointment but he ignored me. My patience with him was finally exhausted. In one swift move I took hold of a carton of eggs he was carrying and pushed it into his face. I was prepared for a fight but the man just stood there looking at me in amazement, with eggs all over his face and shirt. I walked away feeling ashamed of myself.

Iraqi refugees and exiles living in Jordan were sometimes subjected to verbal abuse because of their sectarian affiliation and opposition to the Iraqi regime. While most of these displaced Iraqis were Shia and opposed the Ba’th regime, the Jordanians are Sunni and enthusiastically supported the Iraqi government and regarded its

leader as a national hero. An Iraqi Shia who went to Amman to see his parents was shocked by the profound misconception held by a Jordanian taxi driver regarding their sectarian beliefs. "After learning that we were Iraqi, the taxi driver asked us if the Shia in Iraq pray and fast like other Muslims? Imagine!" Another Iraqi felt deeply insulted when a Jordanian asked him: "Is it true that Shias like you worship an idol instead of Allah?" The daughter of a retired Iraqi professor residing in Amman returned home one day in tears to tell her parents that some of her colleagues at the Jordanian University said to her: "You, Iraqi Shia, are traitors because you fought against the Iraqi government in the second Gulf war."

Many Syrians also exhibited the same attitudes toward Iraqi refugees living in Syria. These Syrians openly supported the Iraqi regime and regarded its leader as "the greatest leader since Saladin", the leader of the forces who fought the Crusaders. The Syrians who are mainly Sunni also suspected Iraqi refugees of being in the service of the Syrian government. A Syrian man admitted to his Iraqi neighbor, after they became well acquainted, that he previously believed all Iraqis to be agents and informers of the Syrian government. Another Syrian told his Iraqi tenant that his friends repeatedly warned him not to lease his apartment to an Iraqi. They told him that only a 'jackass' would do that because his tenant, like all Iraqis, has connections with the security establishment and will use them to reduce the rent or even to squat in his apartment indefinitely. Such misconceptions were bound to discourage Syrians from socializing with and befriending Iraqi refugees and exiles in their country. Several Iraqi refugees complained that they have rarely seen the inside of a Syrian home and usually on a formal business and were never treated to more than a cup of Turkish coffee each time. Iraqis believed that political and religious differences were the main reasons for this lack of warmth in the relations between Iraqi refugees and some of their Syrian hosts.

It must be noted, however, that Iraqi refugees differentiated between the cold reception given to them by many Syrians and the attitude of the Syrian government toward them. The vast majority of Iraqis were full of praise for the Syrian government for allowing them to reside in its country at the time when any other Arab government would have extradited them to Iraq.

Some Iraqi refugees maintained some contacts with Syrians who share their sectarian affiliations. Many of these refugees lived in Shia neighborhood such as al-Ameen and attended prayers and other

religious functions in their husaynias and socialized with some of their neighbors. The strength of these relations was evidenced by the numerous marriages arranged between Iraqi men and Shia Syrian girls. Refugees living in other countries also came to Syria every summer in search of suitable brides. They relied on those residing in the country and especially clerics to help them in this search. In one summer, a Shia cleric arranged several marriages between a number of Iraqis living in Western countries and girls from a Shia town near the Syrian-Lebanese borders. Village girls were obviously preferred by refugees who are mostly of rural, tribal origin.

Only two cases of such marriages ending in divorce came to my attention. In one case the bride insisted on finishing her university studies before joining her husband in the United States. After divorcing her, the discontented Iraqi justified his action by saying that “although they are Shia like us, but we don’t see eye to eye on many things”. In the second case, the Syrian wife accused her Iraqi husband of physical abuse and cruelty. After her parents failed to convince their son-in-law to stop mistreating their daughter, they sought the help of other refugees in convincing him to divorce her. One of these refugees played an important role in introducing the man to his future in-laws and recommended him highly to them. He told me that he vowed never to become involved in arranging a marriage again:

She is a good girl and her family is a nice family but he doesn’t deserve her. I feel guilty because I introduced him to her family and vouched for his character and conduct. It shows that you don’t really know people very well. It was a big disappointment to me when they told me that he was beating her. I thought I was doing the right thing.

While Iraqis found it acceptable for one of them to marry a Syrian or a Lebanese girl, they generally disapproved of a marriage between a Syrian or a Lebanese man and an Iraqi girl. This attitude was prevalent among Iraqis of tribal origin who customarily gave their daughters in marriage only to men with strong tribal roots. For the same reason, an Iraqi female dentist was deeply offended by a marriage proposal from a Syrian plumber. She and other refugees interpreted this offer as indicative of the low status to which their hosts assigned them.

Socializing with Westerners

Iraqi refugees living in Western countries had very limited social contacts with their hosts. They generally blamed cultural barriers and their hosts' unfavorable attitude toward refugees for this. Refugees openly disapproved of Western culture and many of its values and customs and in particular what they regarded as the endemic erosion of family ties and unbridled sexual freedom. Conservative refugees feared that contacts with Westerners could hasten their children's acculturation and acceptance of host values and customs.

Refugees also believed that they were discriminated against and claimed that stereotypes of immigrants and refugees held by their hosts precluded closer contacts between them. Some refugees even accused their hosts of being ethnocentric and intolerant of cultural differences. Female students who conformed to the Islamic code of dress complained that some of their colleagues refer to them scornfully as the 'hijabis'. Another negatively potent stereotype influencing attitudes toward Iraqi refugees portrayed Muslim Arabs as potential or actual terrorists who were intent on undermining the social, political and economic systems of Western countries. The appearance and conduct of many of these refugees who were practicing Muslims could be easily confused with the Western media's image of the religious extremists who resorted to violence in pursuit of their objectives. This negative stereotype popularized by the media was probably behind the assaults on several Iraqis after the Oklahoma bombing in the United States. One of them reported that his door was kicked in by a number of assailants. Language was also a major obstacle to communication and social interaction between refugees and locals. Many refugees arrived with little or no knowledge of their host language and it took them a long time before they acquired basic language proficiency.

Refugees also disapproved of liaisons between refugees and Western women. They described the conduct of a cleric living in Norway who was seen in public in the company of his girlfriend as "scandalous". An Iraqi residing in the United Kingdom was critical of some married refugees who claimed to be devout Muslims for taking local women as "temporary wives" for sexual gratification only. A religious periodical published in Canada and read by many refugees urged its readers to resist the seduction of beautiful Western women by thinking of them as nothing more than "cows". According to the image of Western women held by most refugees, they were unsuitable

marriage partners and unfit mothers because their beliefs and attitudes toward many things such as sexual freedom, drinking, and gambling contradicted Islamic values and commandments.

According to one Iraqi living in Canada, children of refugees suffered the most because “they were caught in the middle between two different cultures pulling them in different directions”. Like many refugees living in Western countries, he believed that their hosts admitted refugees in their countries and tolerated them not for humanitarian reasons but because they needed their children to compensate for low or even negative population growth. “They know that we will never be westernized as much as they would like us to be,” he said, “but they are certain that they will eventually win over our children”.

Even though refugees had limited contacts with their Western hosts, they insisted on projecting and maintaining a positive image of themselves among them. They strongly resented those who tarnished their image by breaking the law or misbehaving in public. A number of refugee claimants in Norway strongly criticized a gang of Iraqi refugees who crashed bars and nightclubs in Oslo’s night districts and terrorized their owners and customers. “Even the Norwegian policemen were afraid of them because they are not used to his kind of violence,” one of these refugees reported. Another said that Iraqi refugees living in Norway were deeply embarrassed by the conduct of a fellow refugee who shortly after being admitted into the country raped a Norwegian woman. “If the Norwegian judge had put him in jail instead of releasing him because ‘he did not understand local laws’ he would not have raped and killed his second victim.”

Chapter Six: Zulfikar's Murder¹

He was ten years younger than me and called me uncle since his father is my cousin. Relationships among clan members are sometimes marred by disagreements, grievances and jealousies and if unresolved escalate into feuds. His grandfather being the youngest of his father's sons harbored a grudge against his brothers for giving him a smaller share of their father's inheritance. Such animosities are usually passed from one generation to another until restitution or a quid pro quo is achieved. Zulfikar knew of this injustice but never showed any sign of it in his behavior toward me.

Undoubtedly, he was one of the few good persons I came to know well in my extended family. This was indeed a great achievement given his family background; my nephew had a difficult childhood and his relationship with his father was turbulent. He was almost thirty when I met him for the first time in Syria where we were both living in exile. His father often belittled him in public because he was studying engineering rather than medicine and progressing slowly in his studies. During his final year at university, he needed money for his graduation project and since his father was out of the country, he came to me for a loan and I gladly gave him the money. I also attended the oral examination of his graduation project while his father stayed away. He passed the exam and his father offered to pay back the loan for the project but I told him it was my graduation present to his son.

Our small apartment in Damascus needed major innovations and I decided to hire him to oversee the project. He was a recent graduate with little experience but he was reliable and needed the work and extra income. His work on my apartment was the first of a string of small renovation projects keeping him in business for many months after.

For the first time in his life, he was supporting himself and did not have to beg and nag his father for his meager pocket money. He was emboldened by his new independence enough to take the plunge. He

¹ This chapter is also found in my book 'Immigrating to Canada: A Personal Story'.

brought his fiancé to meet us and proudly showed her the work he did in our apartment. We attended his wedding unmindful of antagonizing his father who wanted him to marry a relative or at least someone of his own social status instead. It was a modest ceremony in a poor district of al-Saida where other Iraqi refugees lived but he looked happy at the time. The marriage lasted only three months and the divorce was a declaration of his surrender in the face of a fierce and relentless opposition from his father. Soon after the divorce, he was remarried, and this time with the blessing of his father who arranged the marriage.

My emotional reaction to his sudden arrival in Canada was a mixture of gloom and relief. The arrival of more Iraqis indicated a worsening of the situation in my native country and diminishing hopes in any improvements in the short run. I remembered how he used to scorn asylum seekers who lived off the charity of host countries. At the same time, I was relieved to know that my relative had finally taken control of his life and would fill some of the void in our social life here, at least until there is a regime change in Iraq and we could all go back to resume our interrupted lives.

He chose to live in another city but we managed to get together few times. We exchanged news about our family back home, reminisced about the years spent in exile in Syria, and discussed what the future here held in store for us and our children. Unlike me, he was optimistic of finding work and making enough money to give his family a comfortable life. He was also prepared to swallow his pride, bury his diploma and accept any job. He worked as a taxi driver but only temporarily, he told me, and until he saves the down payment on a semi-trailer truck. That dream never came true.

I was overseas looking for work when it happened. My wife called to tell me that he was dead. His friends and neighbors were saying it was the doing of sectarian terrorist killers. The police found his dead body in his taxi, strangled with a metal wire. His taxi was equipped with an alarm but it was not activated. Few days later, his murderers were identified and apprehended and they confessed killing him in retaliation for taking a stand against them in a dispute. His murderers had collected donations for a new prayer hall and after undue delays, my nephew led a campaign to retrieve the money. These criminals were members of 'our people' with whom we shared our cultural roots and looked to them for support. Our shock and horror increased with every new bit of information about the crime, its motives and the grisly details.

A police detective told my wife who went to stay with his widow and children that the murder scene was horrific the like of which he has not seen before. My nephew suffered many stab wounds to his head and hands before his throat was slashed from ear to ear, almost decapitating his head. He pleaded with the killers to let him go: "I won't do anything. I won't bother you again. Spare me for the sake of my children," as unfeelingly reported by one of the convicted slayers. The police determined from the evidence at the scene of the crime that he did put a resistance but was overwhelmed.

He was buried in his native country leaving behind him a wife and three young children. He also left his unfulfilled dreams in Canada. He is still remembered by his family, friends and fellow taxi drivers who added his name to the list of the then almost 200 taxi drivers killed on the job in Canada.

History books tell us about violent men gouging the eyes of their opponents, pulling out their tongues or even chopping off their heads. The likes of these ruthless men still live in my native country, killing innocent people and assassinating their opponents. However, we never imagined that vile tribal customs would follow us all the way to Canada.

All my personal grievances against Canadian institutions and individuals pale in comparison with this tragedy and its implications. This was undoubtedly the ultimate betrayal of all of us who came here for a new beginning and a safe refuge from all the injustices, oppression and prejudices in our native countries only to be confronted with our worst fears, and in the case of Zulfikar pay the heavy price of losing his life.

Chapter Seven: Taking Refuge in Religion

Iraqi refugees are diverse in terms of their religious and sectarian affiliations. However, the majority of them are evidently Muslim Shias. Shias believing that they were oppressed and discriminated against because of their faith put primary emphasis on their sectarian identity. In contrast, Kurdish refugees who are Sunni Muslims claim to be the victims of ethnic discrimination. The significance of religious and sectarian beliefs and affiliations was manifest in the attitudes and behavior of Iraqi refugees. Many of them follow religious principles and customs and practice their religious and sectarian rituals. Religion has also become for many of them who live in Western countries a shelter from what they consider undesirable influences of modern Western societies. Stories about the role of religion in the lives of Iraqi refugees are presented in this chapter.

Where is the nearest husaynia?

This is probably the first question asked by a Shia refugee after his arrival in a country of asylum. His interest in finding the address of the local husaynia may not be purely religious; it is the place where the largest number of Iraqi refugees and exiles congregate at least once every week to pray and to meet with each other. Although Sunnis are not barred from praying in a husaynia, it is a place of worship mainly for Shias.

Unlike mosques, a husaynia is usually a simple structure made up of basically two prayer halls, one for men and another for women, or one large area divided by a partition. Larger husaynias may feature a library, classes for religious studies, conference rooms, offices and living quarters for the resident Imam, a kitchen and other facilities. A husaynia serves as a place for communal prayer and the performance of other religious and social functions such as the tazia. The tazia is a religious ritual for a deceased person hosted by the deceased's family and attended by his relatives, friends and members of the community. The ritual held after night prayers for three days or a week includes recitations from the Holy Koran followed by a sermon delivered by a cleric and culminates on the third or seventh night with a meal cooked

and served on the premises. Husaynias also serve other important purposes such as housing the offices of a prominent cleric, where he meets with his disciples, answer questions regarding religious matters and issues religious edicts. Shias eager to know more about their religion can visit and borrow books from the husaynia's library. In view of all of these symbolic and actual functions, the significance of a husaynia for the Shias cannot be underestimated.

The construction of husaynias is usually financed by wealthy members of the community or by religious leaders with religious taxes collected from pious Shias. In the United Kingdom and North America, wealthy Iraqis who made their fortunes in these countries built large husaynias. Smaller husaynias are sponsored by political parties and groups and are usually frequented by loyal members and sympathizers. For example, the Dawa party had a husaynia in every European capital and North American city where a large number of Iraqi refugees resided. Refugees living on welfare pay or subsistence wages cannot afford the cost of constructing or leasing a building to serve as a husaynia as the following story told by a cleric residing in Canada shows:

I wanted Iraqis in our city to have a really independent husaynia, which is not controlled by a wealthy person or a political group. At first, the response was very encouraging. We managed to collect enough money to pay the lease on a small house and buy the basic furniture. I used to lead prayers every day and deliver regular sermons and lectures on religious topics. Few months later, we needed more money to pay the rent and other necessary expenses. But this time there were fewer donations and the collected sum was far below our expectations and requirements. I know that they are all refugees and could not afford to give much but there would have been enough if each one made a little contribution. It was a sad thing to shut down the husaynia but I had no choice.

Shia refugees also constructed hawzas or traditional religious schools to provide religious instruction and training to persons who wish to become members of the sect's clergy. These hawzas are found in many cities such as London and al-Saida where large numbers of Shias live. Prominent Shia scholars delivered lectures, administered certification exams and supervised theses. Seminary students received monthly stipends covering their living expenses.

The unifying force of religious or sectarian affiliation was manifested in a variety of ways. A Shia refugee, for example, who lived in a sea of Sunnis in Syria or in the midst of Christians and non-believers in Western countries, found his identity within his sectarian group and obtained a valuable sense of belonging and empowerment from associating with them. Fellow Shias could also be the source of material and moral support. A statement by an elderly refugee indicated the important contribution of religion to the psychological and emotional well-being of refugees. He told a cleric that refugees have many tears to shed, and they go to religious functions, which are mostly sad commemorations of martyred leaders, to rid themselves of these tears or repressed sadness.

Political and other differences and rivalries sometimes weakened the unifying role of the *husaynia*. Shia refugees distinguished themselves in terms of their tribal loyalties, urban-rural origin and political beliefs. For example, urban Shias who regarded themselves and their way of life to be superior to tribal Shias and their traditional customs generally avoided associating with them socially. As mentioned previously, refugees from urban centers sometimes disparagingly applied the label 'Rafha group' to the mainly tribal refugees who were housed in the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. Some refugees also separated themselves from those expelled in the early 1980s by calling them *musafareen* or deportees.

Political affiliations also diminished the unifying force of common religion and sect. A wide spectrum of political parties, groups and factions, most of which mushroomed after the second Gulf War, competed for the loyalties of Iraqi refugees and exiles. Each of these parties drew clear ideological borders between itself and other groups on in order to justify its existence and continuity. In their efforts to achieve this, some of these parties and groups, which were essentially secular, resorted to designating a prominent cleric as their *murshed* or spiritual leader. This exploitation of religious sentiments by political groups and the involvement of religious figures in political controversies and machinations undermined the image and function of religion as a unifying force among Iraqi refugees in the diaspora.

Although religious doctrines in Islam override political ideologies and considerations, a person is permitted to conceal his true faith in order to avoid extreme threat from a tyrannical government or enemy. Religious scholars differ on the meanings of extreme threat and many laymen interpret this liberally. This issue was at the center of a

controversy among Iraqi Shia refugees in Toronto in the late 1990s as the following account shows:

We were delighted to hear about the opening of the new husaynia. It was the first husaynia for Iraqi Shias in Toronto. The Iranian, Pakistani and Lebanese Shias already have their own husaynias but this was going to be our own and we were all proud of it. The Iraqi husaynia was totally financed by a wealthy Iraqi merchant who leased a large warehouse and refurbished it to serve as a temporary site until a new Shia mosque is built. We also learned that the land for the big mosque has already been bought and funds amounting to more than a million Canadian dollars have been put aside for the project. The benefactor laid down the following condition on the Imam or preacher of the husaynia and the worshippers using it: No criticism must be directed against the Iraqi regime and its leader Saddam Hussain. One refugee said that the man did this out of fear over the safety of family members in Iraq. Others claimed that he had commercial interests in Iraq which he did not want to lose. Refugees also debated among themselves the religious legitimacy of this condition. One prominent cleric refused to lead prayers or lecture in it. Another justified this condition as a form of *taqia*, i.e. hiding or obscuring one's true faith in order to avoid extreme threats. One refugee, however, rejected this apologetic argument by quoting the Koranic verse which states that only believers who fear no one but Allah build mosques. And since Allah himself has decreed that tyrants and oppressors must be opposed and resisted, anyone who forbids worshipers from doing so is putting himself above or on equal status with Allah.

Rivalries and fierce competition among religious scholars over leadership and followers also hindered unity within the same sect. The Shia theological establishment allows the presence of more than one *marji al-taq'leed* or supreme religious authority. Each of these senior religious scholars or ayatollahs has his own followers who seek his fatwas or edicts on religious and other issues and obey his commands. These followers also pay to him directly or to one of his representatives religious taxes and other charitable donations. Funds collected from pious followers are then distributed among assistants, functionaries,

religious students and needy individuals. Strong partisan loyalties among followers of different leaders intensify rivalries and impede unity. Like Shias everywhere, Iraqi refugees exhibited these factional loyalties.

In spite of these divisive forces, many Iraqi refugees found meaning in their religious and sectarian establishments and highly valued their membership in them. Many Arabic newspapers published in Western countries had a special section to announcements of future religious celebrations by various mosques, husaynias and churches frequented by Iraqis. Shia refugees in these countries celebrated even minor religious anniversaries which were often given less attention in their country. Attendance at these functions was relatively high. To illustrate, communal Eid prayers held in Toronto attracted large crowds and some worshippers had to pray outside the main prayer hall. In addition to observing religious duties, many refugees personally conformed to religious codes concerning appearance and attire. Men exhibited their adherence to these codes by leaving their beards unshaven and by refraining from wearing ties and other garments made of forbidden materials such as silk. Females donned the Islamic hijab and refrained from wearing make-up in public. Demand for Islamic garments in these communities encouraged the opening of several stores catering to the needs of Muslim women. Devout refugees also frequented stores and butcheries that sell properly slaughtered halal meat and other Middle Eastern food products. They also bought and read religious publications, tapes and records and subscribed to Arabic television channels that broadcast regular religious programs.

Refugees living in Western countries lament the fact that their children are not taught anything about Islam in schools. The ideal solution for them is the establishment of more Islamic schools but until that objective is achieved, children of refugees received their religious training at home or mosques. "I provide all the religious training my family need," a father of four told me. "Every now and then I give my wife and children a lecture about a religious topic in the hope that this would strengthen their religious identity and remind them of their religious values and duties."

Traditionalists and reformists

The freedom of thought and expression experienced by refugees for the first time in their lives encouraged some to take a critical look at old beliefs. While many were content to endorse without questioning all religious teaching and respected and obeyed clerics, some skeptics questioned traditional interpretations of religion openly and critically. These protesting voices expressed an array of opinions and did not always agree on all issues. For example, after the suppression of the insurrection, a number of refugees criticized religious leaders and scholars for not doing enough to organize the Shia population against the Iraqi regime. Some of them were dissatisfied with the position of the late grand ayatollah Al-Khoi during the Shia rebellion. They recalled his reluctance to condemn the atrocities committed by troops loyal to the Iraqi regime and his weak stand in a televised meeting with the Iraqi leader. Some refugees who took part in the insurrection claimed that “they expected the clerics to send reinforcements and advisors but instead we only received pictures of some of them”. These disapproving refugees compared the lassitude of these clerics against the shining examples of Muhammad Baqir al-Saddar and other religious dignitaries who were executed or tortured to death by the Iraqi regime because of their active opposition. These critical Shias also maintained that only those who participated in the resistance movement, involved themselves in matters concerning the community and strived to transform the lives of ordinary Shias deserved their respect and loyalty.

Some refugees now openly described the religious establishment as being plagued with opportunists whose main concern is gaining wealth, power and influence at the expense of religion and the believers’ interests. The attitudes and behavior of those clerics are condemned for giving a distorted image of the Shia sect and its teachings. To illustrate, a female refugee wrote to a newspaper complaining about the improper behavior of a cleric. “I visited him to ask for help,” she wrote, “and he told me that he would help me only if I consent to *muta* marriage with him”. *Muta* is a temporary form of marriage legalized by the Shias but practiced mainly for sexual gratification.

Religious dignitaries receive large sums of money as religious taxes and charity donations from practicing Shias. The continuity of this important practice depends on the proper handling of these funds by

these dignitaries. A number of refugees who previously lived in the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia told the following story about an unscrupulous cleric who abused their trust:

One day this well-known cleric visited our camp. He claimed that he represented Iraqi fighters who were waging a guerilla warfare campaign against the Iraqi regime in the southern marshes. He also told us that he was collecting donations for this great cause and we believed him. Every one of us was eager to contribute, and many of us donated all the money they had saved from the pay given to them by the Saudis. We collected tens of thousands of Saudi riyals and gave it to him. Sometime later we found out from leaders of the resistance that they never received our donations.

Another refugee who wanted to enlist the help of a cleric in performing some charity work had the following disappointing experience:

I had used clothes, which were in excellent condition. Some of these clothes were actually expensive like-new garments donated by a wealthy Bahraini lady and if sold could fetch tens of thousands of Syrian liras. I also had few thousand of liras of my own to give away as charity. I asked other refugee for the name and address of a Shia cleric who would accept those donations and distribute them among needy Iraqis. After some hesitation, they said that they could only trust one to do this. Only one! Few days later, I packed the clothes in suitcases, hired a taxi and gave the driver the address of this trustworthy cleric in al-Saida. An Afghani servant opened the door for me and after explaining to him the purpose of my visit he told me to wait while he asked his employer. He came back saying that the cleric can only take financial donations. I said goodbye to the Afghani servant and told the taxi driver to take me back to al-Ameen, which is a Shia neighborhood in Damascus. There I asked a shopkeeper if he could direct me to a pious man who performed charity work. He did and the man said he would take the clothes and the money.

“The only Iraqis who ride in chauffeur-driven Mercedes in al-Saida are clerics.” This observation reflected the deep resentment felt by many Iraqi refugees toward Shia clerics and their disapproval of their

lifestyle. It also made the implicit accusation that those clerics were improperly using religious taxes and donations to pay for personal expenses and comfort.

The activities of Ahl-Albait Establishment, founded by heirs of the late grand ayatollah al-Khoi, was the focus of argument and controversy among Iraqi Shias abroad. After the death of al-Khoi in Iraq, his sons and heirs assumed control of the financial assets left by him. Some Iraqi Shias living abroad objected to this because these funds are of a religious nature and cannot be inherited. They felt that their objections were vindicated when his heirs presented a multimillion donation toward the establishment of a new university in Jordan. According to these critics, this was inappropriate because the Jordanian government acted contrary to the interests of the Shia, and indeed all Iraqis, by allying itself with the Iraqi regime. While some Iraqis applauded the achievements of this establishment and especially winning an observer status at the United Nations, a disapproving refugee had this to say about its activities: "What have they done for the Shia abroad? They got this observer status in the UN because of the billions of dollars of our money. How about building a school here for our children?"

A major debate within the Shia sect centered on the teachings of Muhammad Hussain Fadluallah, a senior Lebanese religious scholar. Fadluallah oversaw a large educational and charitable establishment in Lebanon and many Lebanese Shia and Iraqi refugees recognized his supreme leadership in religious matters. His critical analysis of some religious practices and his questioning of the authenticity of some historical events of religious significance aroused much controversy among Shia everywhere. His supporters insisted that according to religious traditions, any *mujtahid*, i.e. senior religious scholar, was entitled to conduct critical studies of religious topics and publish his findings. His critics, on the other hand, insisted on strict conformity to the theological heritage and warned that such dissenting opinions may not only undermine the doctrinal base of the sect but also create schisms within the ranks of its members. Some traditional scholars and their followers claimed that these new interpretations of what they regarded as religious axioms and documented historical events were nothing more than attempts to win favor with the majority Sunni Muslims. Iraqi Shia living in exile were also divided on this issue. Conservative elements among them joined their religious leaders in condemning these new ideas and calling their originator a 'misled'

person. One of these angry critics admonished a publisher of religious books for printing a picture of the mosque in which Fadulallah preached on the cover of one of his publications. In contrast, many Iraqi refugees endorsed these new ideas. One of these supporters felt that Fadulallah did the sect a great service by questioning and rejecting some practices and, more importantly, by stimulating intellectual analysis and debate within the sect.

Few independent-minded Iraqi Shias living in exile have gone to the extreme of rejecting the validity of basic sectarian doctrines and practices. Reaction to these revisionists was generally hostile, and even critics of the religious establishment found their opinions unacceptable. They saw in this an organized plot to undermine the sect by encouraging attacks on its core beliefs and accused its originators and proponents of being paid agents of enemies of the Shia. Associating these renegades with the historical enemies of the sect was intended to discredit them in the eyes of all Shia. One of them claimed that his life was threatened by Iraqi refugees and applied for asylum in the United Kingdom but his application was rejected.

Inter-confessional relations

Iraqi refugees can be classified according to their religious and sectarian affiliation into three major groups: the Muslim Shia, the Muslim Sunni and the Christians. Although Christians belonged to several denominations, other refugees perceived them as one group. A number of factors such as doctrinal differences, past relations and international and regional events shaped relations between these groups. In general, mutual suspicion and distrust characterized relations among them. Each group had its own separate community and organizations, and its members interacted mainly with other members of their group. Although most of them disapproved of the ruling regime in Iraq, they differed on the nature and composition of the government that should replace it and the means of achieving this change.

Iraqi Christians generally stayed outside politics after the suppression of the Assyrians revolt in the 1930s. Representatives of these Christians living abroad generally called for the creation of a secular democratic regime in Iraqi that respects the basic rights of all citizens. They also opposed the continuation of economic sanctions

against Iraq and were actively conducting humanitarian campaigns to help victims of these sanctions inside Iraq. Some non-Christian refugees claimed that many Iraqi Christians supported the Iraqi secular regime and his suppression of Islamic groups inside Iraq. They pointed out that during the 1980s Christians of Iraqi origin living in the United States publicly applauded the policies of the Iraqi leadership and especially its war against the Islamic government in Iran. In return for this enthusiastic support, the Iraqi regime granted them large sums of money, some of which was used to finance the establishment of a television station. Shia refugees also complained that while Shia are excluded from senior posts in the Iraqi leadership, the Christian Mikhail Aziz, alias Tariq Aziz, is the Deputy Prime Minister and that while most Shia merchants were deported from Iraq, many Christian businessmen made their fortunes under the present regime.

Mutual mistrust and hostilities lasting for centuries overshadowed relations between the Sunni and Shia groups. Religious and sectarian loyalties were strong in Middle Eastern countries and have been a cause or a contributing factor in many wars and civil disturbances. Historically, the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shia Persian state frequently invoked sectarian differences in their long-standing heated competition over land and spheres of influences. This rivalry was frequently played out on Iraqi territories and often violently leaving in its aftermath deep sectarian divisions and animosities. Shia refugees strongly believed that the Iraq-Iran war was a sectarian war waged by the Sunni Iraqi leadership and its international and local supporters on the Shia Iranians. Many of them also consider the Shia insurrection in the South and its brutal suppression by Iraqi forces to be the latest major manifestations of this long-standing animosity.

Iraqi Sunnis accused the Shia of being more loyal to their sectarian group than their country and Arab nation. Shia refugees rejected this as a false pretext designed to deprive them of their legitimate political, economic and religious rights and especially their right to be fairly represented in the government. They generally believed that Sunnis inside and outside Iraq aimed to maintain their monopoly over political power and explicitly or implicitly supported the Sunni regime in power. They also argued that even Sunni Arabs who supported political change in Iraq insisted on retaining their control over politics.

Iraqi Shia are mindful of the many publications and statements by Sunni religious scholars and laymen which criticized their faith and often branded them as heretics. Shia publications also emphasized the

distinct confessional identity of the sect and the authenticity of its beliefs. All of these factors soured relations between members of the two sects living in exile. A Sunni academic in the United States told me that he was offended by a lecture given by a Shia who said that he was originally a Sunni before “converting to the true faith”. A Shia living and working in a Gulf country complained that one or more of his Sunni Iraqi colleagues spied on him and sent their reports to the Iraqi security agency which subsequently interrogated his relatives in Iraq.

Muslim refugees dread the possibility of one of them converting to another faith. They considered this to be the ultimate, unforgivable act of treason. In Western countries, refugees complained of being targeted by Christian missionaries. A number of them living in a high-rise apartment building in Toronto claimed that after receiving regular visits from missionaries, they now believed that they must have an office in the same building. Although there were reports of refugees agreeing to have their weddings performed in churches, only two cases of conversion to Christianity came to my attention. A reliable authority disputed the authenticity of one of the two cases leaving only the following case as narrated by his brother.

The convert

He was my only full brother. I had seven half-brothers, most of whom are now dead but he was my only full brother. Of course, I loved him very much and respected him because he was the elder. We had another brother but he died mysteriously before I was born and my mother accused one of my father’s wives of killing him. My father had four wives and my mother was his number four. His other wives and their children hated us because they believed that he favored us. This isn’t true. My father gave all of us equal shares of his wealth and stern parenting. He was a tribal chief but he wanted his children to go to schools and become doctors and engineers. Christian missionaries ran the best school in our country but we never heard of any of its students converting to Christianity. I did hear an alarming story involving our elder half-brother, which should have convinced my father not to send his sons to Christian schools. My half-brother returned home one day from his Lebanese Christian school wearing a cross around his neck. But my father was not a deeply religious man. He did pray regularly but he failed to give us proper religious instruction.

After graduating from the Jesuit high school in Baghdad we were enrolled at the American university in Lebanon. That was another bad choice. A father should know better than to send his teenage sons alone to a foreign country. He knew that the morals of a young man could easily be corrupted in Lebanon. He knew this very well because he used to spend almost every summer in a mountain resort in that country. My mother – she was a saintly woman who devoted her life to her children and suffered immensely – begged him to keep us near her. But he refused saying that students at the local university would teach his sons to meddle in politics.

Although he was three years my senior, I was better prepared than my brother to face the world and resist its numerous temptations. You see I taught myself how to pray and I was an avid reader. Beirut was a den of decadence in the late 60s. That was few years before the civil war. Female students at the university wore miniskirts before it became the fashion in the West. I remember attending the class of a philosophy professor who insisted that all his female students sit in the front rows so that he can feast his eyes on their bare thighs. Some students were experimenting with LSD and taking hashish. It was difficult to resist all these temptations. Many of the students I knew dropped out and one of them became a drug addict and had to be hospitalized in a mental asylum. Another student committed suicide. It was at that time that I met a nice girl and we got married.

Since you are writing about Iraqi refugees, the story of this Iraqi student should interest you. He was the first refugee I met in my life. I never imagined then that one day I'd be a refugee like him. Anyhow he wanted to ride the wave of the times and so he became a guru. And like all gurus he did not shave his beard. Sometime later he went to the Iraqi Consulate in Beirut to have his passport renewed and the consul told him that he must first stop acting like a hippie. The guru student refused and after a heated argument he threw his passport at the consul and left the place. He then went to the offices of the United Nations and applied for refugee status. This happened in 1969 or 1970, less than two years after the Ba'th came to power. Eventually, he was given his passport back. Did I mention that he was a Christian? Many years later, he fell in love with a Muslim Shia girl and converted to Islam so that he can marry her.

"Our brother is a weakling," I told my sister the other day. My brother never liked the guru. I think that he was jealous of him. The man was articulate, sociable and very popular with his colleagues – all the

qualities that my brother lacked. But they both had the same flaw in their characters: a high need for power and control over others. Fate played a nasty trick on both of them when they ended up being controlled.

‘Don’t forsake your brother,’ my sister urged me. ‘I did not desert him,’ I told her, ‘He deserted us’. My brother has always been a deserter. My mother told me that he never liked to stay at home beside her, but I did. She once tried to stop him from taking her money and giving it away to his friends in a street gang and he slashed her wrist with a shaving blade. As an elder brother, he was a total disappointment. He ignored me completely and preferred to associate with an older half-brother. That’s why I call him a deserter.

I am not saying that he was an evil person but he was undoubtedly a weakling and a deserter. While he completed his post-graduate studies abroad, I went back to supervise the farm and earn enough money to pay for his university fees and expenses. My sister helped by contributing almost all her salary. My brother took a lot from our mother, sister and from me and gave us very little and only reluctantly.

After graduating he came back to a teaching position at the university, a three-story villa built by our father and a proud aging mother. I finished my studies three years later and went back with my wife. By that time all teaching posts at all levels of education were reserved for members of the ruling Ba’th party. It was morally and ideologically unthinkable for me to join the party so I had to accept a minor position in a training institute. Almost every Iraqi between the age of fifteen and fifty had by then become a party member either to escape the harassment of the government or to win its favor and privileges. To my shock and surprise, my brother told me that he had joined the party but he tried to make light of it. I advised him to leave the party before he became entangled in its wicked webs and they start ordering him to spy on others and torture innocent people and he heeded my advice.

I did him another great service. He was not a gambler or a drinker but he was a social animal and a conformist and was willing to do everything possible to win the acceptance of his peers. His reference group at that time consisted of one of our half-brothers and his gambling and drinking cronies. Every weekend, they met together in our half-brother’s house for many hours of gambling and drinking. On these nights, our ailing mother stayed awake until he came back. She never forgot the tragic death of her child and never stopped suspecting

her husband's kin of trying to do away with the rest of her children. I reasoned with him to stop going to these parties if not for his sake then for the sake of our mother and he eventually stopped going there.

There was one more thing about my brother that I wished to change but did not know how to go about it. One of his new friends, a lecturer in another university, was the son of a wealthy Christian who owned a large three-star hotel. He was not the type that I would choose as my friend and certainly not in a country like Iraq. I was glad when this friend of my brother eventually skipped the country. My brother told me that he left because he did not like the work environment and the lack of freedoms in our country. My brother was misinformed or lied. Months later, the truth behind this sudden departure was revealed to me. A lecturer who worked in the same department with my brother's friend lost favor with the ruling party and was transferred to the training agency. One day he told me that this friend used to bring some of his female students to his father's hotel where he seduced them. He also allowed other staff members to bring their students to the hotel. This conduct was not only unethical but also unlawful and when the security people were informed about his activities, he decided to leave the country. You see how foolish my brother was. If he were implicated with his friend, he would have been put in jail for the rest of his life or could have been killed by a relative of one of these students.

There are millions of Iraqis living outside of their country and most of them are suffering. I'm one of them and I can tell you that I had not stopped worrying and feeling miserable since I left Iraq almost twenty years ago. But these miserable millions did not behave like my brother because they were not deserters and weaklings like him.

'It is my fault,' my sister said recently over the phone. 'I blame myself for what happened. He told me one day that he wanted to get married and could I recommend one of my friends to him and I did nothing'. This is why my sister blames herself. In our society it is usually the mother's job to arrange the marriage of her sons and since our mother was old and infirm the responsibility shifted to our sister. Our sister loves our brother dearly but she is also a fair-minded person and perhaps she did think that our brother would make a good husband to any of her friends.

Kismet put this girl in his path but it did not ordain their marriage. She literally stood in his path and offered herself to him. 'Wherever I went I found her standing in my way,' he told our sister. That was the kind of women of whom folk tales warned. He, of course, believes that she is

in love with him. I am not excluding that but he should have made sure that it was not an infatuation. After all he was her professor and almost fifteen years older than she was. Anyhow, it was his life and I did not want to meddle in it. We, my wife and I, were in the United Kingdom when he told me about his marriage plan. I remember clearly shopping for a wedding gown for her and a fine suit for him in Oxford and Regent Streets. We paid for them with our own money. The dress and suit were never worn because her parents objected to her marriage to a Muslim. Should I have opposed the marriage because she was a Christian and risked losing him as a brother? I didn't but who has the courage to do the right thing always?

They continued to meet after her parents disrupted their marriage plan. He used to bring her home and they spent several hours together in the reception hall. Whenever we saw him carrying his mattress into the reception hall, we knew that she was coming to see him on that day. He behaved shamelessly in front of our mother and sister. Our mother was terrified of her though she never laid eyes on her. She was convinced that her son's girlfriend was a witch who wanted to harm him and her. At that time, we thought that our mother was becoming senile but now I have my doubts. Our mother became obsessed with this imaginary witch and with neutralizing the spells she was casting on us. Her health suffered as a result.

My mother's worst nightmares became a reality when her elder son ordered her to move out of her room so that he can have it ready for his bride. His girlfriend had told him that she was now willing to elope with him. It was his house but our mother begged our father for over twenty years to build it for her beloved son. He could have humored her fears and postponed his marriage or at least allowed her to stay in her room and chose another room. He denied that he threw her things downstairs but I am certain of it. Few days later, our mother had a stroke and died at the hospital.

'I was constantly worried over your safety. Every day after you left to work, I sat and imagined the security police barging into your office and leading you to one of their numerous secret prisons,' my wife told me after we left the country. I was not active in the opposition but everyone could tell that I was against the regime and its war with Iran. And I refused to volunteer in the militia and wrote a critical report on the management style of a leading member of the party. This was twenty years ago and since then I have not seen my sister or her four daughters. But I did see my brother few months later.

I left Iraq out of fear over my safety and the safety of my family but he left for the sole purpose of getting married and ended up against his will as a refugee like me. After spending a month and a half with my brothers-in-law in Saudi Arabia I left for Egypt. My brother arrived a week before I returned to Saudi Arabia to work there as a trainer. He had one suitcase with him because he told me that he did not want to arouse the suspicions of the security police at Baghdad's airport. It turned out he left because his girlfriend did not want to offend her parents by marrying him, a Muslim, in Iraq. I could not stay to attend the wedding which he told me will be conducted according to Islamic traditions.

Nine months later we met again this time in London. He was staying there with his wife after spending four months in Libya, which he described as nightmarish. He claimed that the university, which employed him, did not provide him with an accommodation. As a result, they had to live in a hotel. It must have been a one-star hotel. They had to share the bathroom with other guests and he bitterly complained of having to stand guard in front of the bathroom's door every time his wife used it because it did not have a latch. Of course, I sympathized with him. When I told those who lived in Libya or had relatives living and working there his story, they were skeptical saying that a good hotel or an apartment did not cost much. I guess when you love someone you don't see his flaws, not all of them at least.

It was difficult not to notice how insecure he was. Since leaving Libya without telling his employer and again with few of his belongings so as not to attract attention at Benghazi airport he had been in contact with a Kuwaiti friend of mine to find work for him. My helpful Kuwaiti friend managed to find him a good position in a Kuwaiti company. Few days after our reunion, my brother was told to report to the Kuwaiti embassy to have the visa stamped on his passport. He came to tell me before going to the embassy. Half an hour later he came back saying that he saw a demonstration in the street where the embassy was located and decided to try the day after. The Iraqi embassy was in the vicinity and he assumed that Iraqi dissidents organized the demonstration and in case the Iraqi diplomats were filming he decided to go back. Can a person be more insecure and paranoid than this?

He finally had the visa stamped and flew to Kuwait. Two years later, his passport expired. A cousin who was active in the Iraqi opposition had it renewed. If my brother had gone to the embassy, I am sure they would have renewed his passport but I guess he was too scared. When

his passport expired again four years later, he left first to Cyprus and then to Portugal.

Two years later, he called from Portugal to ask for money. I was by then stateless and living in exile in Syria. He told me that he needed ten thousand pounds to finance his new export business. He assured me that the success of his business venture was guaranteed and he would not require more money. He was asking me to give him one fourth of all my money which took me six years of work to save. I couldn't say no because he was my brother.

Six months later, he wrote saying that he had spent all the money and needed more. I was shocked and wrote back telling him that I had no more money to spare but he was welcome to join me in Syria and I would share with him what remained of my savings. He refused my offer because his wife could not call her family in Iraq from Syria. Do you believe that? I was living in Syria on less than three thousand dollars per year and he wanted me to pay for his stay in Portugal. It was obvious that she dominated him but I did not know everything then.

Soon after, he left to the United Kingdom where he found a job and stopped writing about his financial woes. I spent eight years in Syria without steady work and survived on my savings and a small income from my publications and translations. After that, my brother-in-law gave us a big loan to finance our immigration to Canada. I wished that I never left Syria but that's another story.

He called for the first time in ten years from London to congratulate me on my successful operation to remove a cancerous tumor from my right lung and to give me his telephone number. After that we called each other regularly. Sometimes he stayed over the phone for more than an hour. He talked much about God and the supernatural world. I consider myself to be a religious person but I don't go on about it all the time. At first, I was happy that he finally found a purpose and meaning for life but later I had these nagging doubts.

'I think my brother has gone mad,' I told my wife. She laughed at me and said that my brother was always a levelheaded person. 'He sounds like a lunatic to me. The fears and paranoia must have finally destroyed his mind.' But she refused to believe me.

'He sounds like those religious fanatics to me, but not like our own,' I said to my wife after another telephone call. 'He talks more like a ...Christian.' This time, my wife laughed at me even louder. 'You're imagining things,' she said.

After four years of uninterrupted residency in Canada I got the passport. Months before that, I was planning with my brother over the phone to see him in London and with my sister to meet with her in Jordan. It finally happened after sixteen years of separation. It was a very awkward, emotional reunion for someone in his early fifties. Next day I went to see him and his wife at their small apartment not far from Heathrow airport. Of course, I had lots of gifts for both of them.

We sat and talked about many things. I attributed the tension to the long separation and thought that it would soon disappear but it did not. I also noticed something odd about their relationship. She was very curt, almost rude with him, and his behavior toward her was apologetic, almost submissive. I gave him a copy of the tragic biography of our mother and I was surprised to see her reading it before he did. It was as if their roles have been reversed: now she was the professor and mentor and he was the pupil and novice. It was only later that I understood the cause of her nervousness. I was trespassing on her turf and she was worried that I would snatch her trophy possession, namely my brother. He was her most valuable achievement in this world and her ticket to heaven in the afterlife, or so she believed.

‘He owed her much or at least she convinced him of that,’ I told my sister after discovering the truth. ‘She married a prince: a professor with a huge villa overlooking the Tigris river, a car and a good family. And before the stroke of midnight he turned into a mouse. The professorship was gone. The car, the money and the good family were past history.’ ‘He is weak,’ my sister interrupted. ‘She wanted something back, a compensation from him for disappointing her so painfully,’ I said. ‘She demanded his soul and he gave it to her’.

‘Perhaps he did it because he needed the money and they offered him a job,’ my sister added in defense of our brother. It is possible, I told myself. He was possibly very desperate and thought that this was the only way out of his troubles. He was a weakling after all. He went to them claiming that his life was now in danger and they must have sympathized with him because he was now one of them. And then they gave him a new identity, a passport and a minor job.

‘But if he did it just for the job or the passport why didn’t he tell me that in strict confidence? I’m his brother and surely he can trust me.’ I argued with my sister. ‘I read about these Pakistanis who travel to the United Kingdom to apply for asylum claiming that they belong to the Ahmadiyya religion which is branded as heretical by Sunnis as well as Shia. But it is only a pretense to obtain asylum.’

The charade lasted three days. On the fourth day I could not stand the tension and the pretense anymore. I wanted to know the truth no matter how painful it was going to be. But later on, I regretted it. I told my wife that it would have been better if he had kept it a secret. I mean he hid the truth from us for more than ten years. For a whole decade while we rotted in our diaspora, he lied to us and cheated us and took our money on false pretenses. Why didn't he play the game a little longer? I was only staying in London for a week and only God know when I would be able to visit him again. I was still unemployed. Canadian employers refused to hire me unless I have Canadian experience. I had a doctorate and almost forty publications in English and Arabic but my qualifications were not good enough for a clerical job. And they dare to say that they are fair and unprejudiced. I was practically living on the charity of my in-laws and could not afford another reunion with my brother.

We had just left my seedy, overpriced hotel in Piccadilly Circus and we were strolling down Regent Street when this urge to flush the truth out of him overtook me. I took an indirect line of attack and he almost gave himself away. An hour later we were back in the hotel and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and imagine my family doctor back in Toronto knotting her eyebrows in a display of discontent as she read my blood pressure.

'Have you converted to Christianity?' I asked him. Pandora's box was about to be opened and the genie was being let out of its bottle.

'Yes.'

I suspected it even before seeing him and I thought that this would soften the impact of the shock and disappointment but I was wrong.

'What do you call yourself now?'

'Michael or Mikhail if you like.' I could not help thinking that all the bartenders in Iraq are commonly addressed as Micha, short for Mikhail. His original name, Muhammad, and Michael have the same initial. When I wrote to M. I thought I was writing to Muhammad when in fact it was Michael.

'Why did you do it?'

'I saw hell. He showed it to me. Anyone who had seen what I saw would have done the same thing.' He did not make sense at all.

'It happened in Portugal.' He hid it from us for ten years. 'I was going through rough times and desperate enough to try anything. There was this shrine. People went to the shrine to ask for things. They wrote their wishes on pieces of paper and put them in a box. There is a statue of

the saint on top of his tomb and I saw him raise three fingers and point them at me.'

This was the final proof that my brother had lost his mind. His paranoia and anxiety must have led him to hallucination.

'Do you know how many people in this world see ghosts, vampires and UFOs or claim to have extrasensory perception or hear voices and are convinced that God or Jesus speak to them? You are a man of science and you don't need to a degree in psychology to know that people sometimes hallucinate. It happened to me at the hospital after my operation. They gave me strong painkillers and I saw strange visions. LSD is called a hallucinogen. And you remember how many times our mother told us about miracles she or someone she knew witnessed.'

'But I saw it with my own eyes. He raised three fingers indicating the Christian trinity. And there was another miracle. After leaving Portugal, I went back to Kuwait looking for work. I didn't stay for long but few months after my departure the Iraqi army occupied Kuwait. If I had stayed there the Iraqis would have captured me. Whom do you think got me out? The Virgin Mary! The time of my departure flight from Kuwait was 3:00 p.m. exactly— three again."

He is free to choose the religion he likes but he had no right to lie to us and deceive us for almost ten years. I cannot condone what he did. I certainly do not want my children to think that this is acceptable. I told him not to call or write again. It is not the fault of the Iraqi regime that my brother converted in exile but it may not have happened if he was not overwhelmed by fear of the regime.

Chapter Eight: Refugees and Politics

Whenever two or more Iraqi refugees met or talked over the telephone or the Internet, they were bound to discuss politics. They did this although they may have more pressing concerns on their minds and regardless of the sadness and bitterness it invoked. Discussions of politics among Iraqis frequently involved passionate exchanges, shouting matches and occasionally violence. They justified this high degree of personal involvement in politics by pointing out that the stakes were high. After all, politics forced them into exile and only politics could reverse this. Their exchanges on political topics usually did not stray far from news of recent developments and the implication of world events for the Iraqi situation. The freedom of thought and expression and exposure to different political ideologies and system of governments enjoyed by most of them enriched their political experiences. This in turn sharpened their political acumen and strengthened their confidence in their analytical abilities and opinions. Despite this new sophistication, Iraqi refugees and exiles persistently failed to reach agreement on political issues of concern to all of them such as the form of organization that will marshal their efforts toward the achievement of their common objectives and represent and defend their interests. Stories presented in this chapter shed some light on the reasons behind this.

One common objective

Most Iraqi refugees and exiles held the Iraqi regime responsible for all their misfortunes. "If it wasn't for the Ba'th government," their simple straightforward argument began, "There would have been no wars or economic sanctions that killed millions of Iraqis and we would still be living in our homes with our families and enjoying one of the highest standard of living in the world." As long as the Ba'th regime remained in power, they added, their suffering and that of millions of Iraqis will continue. Therefore, they concluded, the Iraqi regime must be overturned.

When Iraqis greeted each other on religious feasts, they wished each other a happy feast and a speedy fulfillment of their most cherished objectives. At the top of their lists of objective was living to see the overthrow of the regime in power: "May Allah grant us the wish of returning to our country sooner rather than later." Or "Allah willing, we will celebrate the next Eid in Iraq." Some repeated these words in sincerity and with full conviction in the power of prayers while others sadly believed that it was nothing more than wishful thinking. Their expectations regarding the future of the Iraqi regime often reflected their mood more than their realistic evaluation of the forces in the situation. When the pendulum of their mood swung toward the pessimistic side, they dismissed any possibility of an imminent regime change:

The Ba'th regime will never be removed . It is still powerful. The United States, Britain and all their allies in the region may declare that they want to see the regime overthrown but in fact they want it to stay. The talk about a popular revolt in al-Thawra, a Shia district in Baghdad, is unrealistic. The regime will use all and any weapon, including chemical weapons, to put down any new insurrection.

All believers, however, are instructed to have hope, to trust in Allah, and to be optimistic. One of the most frequently quoted verse of the Holy Koran by Iraqis, and indeed by many Arabs dissatisfied with the situation in their countries, states that Allah does not change the state of a nation unless its people change themselves first. The following argument advanced by an educated Iraqi who has spent almost twenty years in voluntary exile supported this belief. "The current regime is sustained by certain flaws or weaknesses in the Iraqi society, and only if these problems are removed, we can expect a real positive political change in Iraq." Another refugee expressed a similar opinion: "The Iraqi regime is a lens in which all the problems and failings of the Iraqi society are focused."

In view of the durability of the regime and its continuation for more than three decades in which it survived two wars, economic blockade, and the devaluation of the Iraqi dinar to a fraction of its original value, refugees wondered sometimes if this was not God's just retribution. "Aren't we after all ahal al-Kuffa," some exclaimed. As explained earlier, traditional Shia labeled evil persons as "the people of Kuffa." Many Shia believed that their Imams put a curse on the original

inhabitants of Kuffa and their descendants for failing to support them on many occasions and for betraying them few times. This curse condemned these people for being unfaithful to their rightful and just leaders to suffer oppressive and cruel rulers. Accordingly, the existence and continuation of the Iraqi regime in power was seen by some refugees as a punishment for failing to obey Allah's commandments and for supporting this regime.

After an Arab ruler survived a number of assassinations and unsuccessful coups, some of his subjects began to wonder if he was divinely or magically invincible. A devout refugee told me that Saddam Hussain was in possession of several magical beads which protected him from assassination. He added that when he was living as a refugee in Iran, he saw him on Iraqi television receiving a gift of several of these beads from an old woman. After inspecting the beads, the Iraqi President, according to this story, returned all of them to the woman except one which he deposited in his shirt pocket. Another Iraqi refugee reported this amazing story circulating among refugees, which suggested that the Iraqi regime may be divinely favored:

Lately, I have heard this very unsettling story. The story alleges that the governments of Iraq, Syria and Jordan decided to call on the citizens of the three countries to hold a joint *Istisqa* prayer, i.e. a special prayer for rain, in view of the long drought affecting the whole Middle East. Soon after the conclusion of the prayer, it rained for three days on Iraq but not a single drop fell on Syria or Jordan. What do you think are the implications of this?

In search of clean politics

Iraqi refugees were discouraged from actively participating in dissident politics by a number of factors, such as their negative attitudes toward politics and politicians and their lack of experience in this field. A common stereotype of Iraqis held by many Arabs pictured them taking part in a demonstration, carrying banners, shouting political slogans and clashing with riot-control police. This image of the Iraqi as a political enthusiast or activist may apply to educated urban, middle-class Iraqis in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s but not contemporaries of the ruling Ba'th regime. Iraqis admitted that this regime has succeeded over three decades of oppressive rule in taming

their 'revolutionary disposition' and eliminating their independent thinking. Demonstrations, which were common before 1968, were banned except those organized by the regime. Also, the ruling party was the only political group officially recognized and licensed in the country, and Iraqis convicted or even suspected of being members of banned underground parties or groups faced long jail sentences or the death penalty. Iraqi refugees before their defection lived in abject fear of the regime's spies and large network of informers. Political issues were rarely brought up in discussion and only among close family members and friends and almost never in front of children who may repeat their elder's views to schoolteachers and staff. Their fathers and grandfathers may have participated in parliamentary elections held before 1958 but since then few elections have been organized and all of them were staged by the government in power which allowed only members of the ruling party or loyalists to stand for election.

As a result, politics for many Iraqis inside and outside Iraq acquired negative connotations. It was associated in their minds with tyranny, war, imprisonment, torture, oppression, discrimination, economic hardship, and loss of dignity and opportunism. They often described politics as a 'dirty' game, which tainted all those who played it. Anyone who wanted to preserve his good name, peace of mind and personal safety was advised to stay away from it.

Many of the refugees were members in the ruling party before taking part in the insurrection in the south or seeking asylum. They claimed that the government, which made membership in the party a prerequisite for employment, enrolment in certain schools and institutes or for obtaining a professional or commercial license, coerced them into enlisting. In this way they set themselves apart from partisans and opportunists who voluntarily joined the party to gain influence and other benefits. Accordingly, all politicians including some members of the opposition were regarded with suspicion and mistrust. All these factors explained the reluctance of Iraqi refugee to become actively involved in dissident politics. An explanation of this tendency among many refugees may be found in their stories and comments presented in the following sections.

Refugees and opposition groups

Before the second Gulf war, the opposition was made up of a number of parties and groups which operated mainly in Iran, Syria and the United Kingdom. These included the Shia religious parties, the Kurdish nationalists, the pro-Syria Ba'th faction, the Nasserites and the Communists. The defeat of the Iraqi army in Kuwait raised hopes in an imminent overthrow of the regime and encouraged many retired Iraqi politicians living abroad to return to the political arena in the early 1990s. A young Iraqi refugee made the following comment on this development:

We have been living here in Syria for more than 10 years. We have here the Dawa party and other Islamic groups, the Nationalists and the Communists but where did all these other people who claim to be leaders of the opposition have been hiding all this time? I have heard or read about some of them but I thought they were dead. You must know the Arabic adage, which says that when the bull is down on its knees, many will draw out their knives to carve him up.

The intense activities of the old and new opposition groups and the optimistic statements made by a number of opposition figures fueled the refugee's expectations of a speedy collapse of the Iraqi regime. Some of them believing that the days of the regime in Baghdad were numbered began to plan for their imminent return to their country. The wife of one refugee said that she prepared a list of the gifts that she would take back with her. When these expectations proved to be unfounded, the refugees accused the opposition leaders of failing to deliver on their promises and of deceiving them.

Many refugees found fault in the policies of some opposition groups, the conduct of their leaders and membership requirements. Iraqi refugees were generally critical of their inability to reach agreements on a common strategy and to win support for their causes. They doubted the sincerity and integrity of some opposition leaders and suspected them of being opportunists exploiting the causes of the opposition to gain power and financial benefits. Stories alleging unscrupulous behavior by some opposition leaders were readily believed without checking for their authenticity first. Many of these refugees who held a low opinion of the effectiveness of the opposition

dismissed the suggestion that it could pose a serious threat to the survival of the Iraqi regime as ludicrous.

Some refugees felt that newly formed opposition groups which were exclusively made up of their founders shut them out. Many opposition groups working outside Iraq were indeed elitist and their memberships were not open to all refugees. This elitist tendency had its historical root in the distinction in Arab society between the *khasa*, i.e. the governing elite or aristocracy, and the *amma* or common subjects. The common people were traditionally forbidden from taking part in the political or governing process and were expected to fully endorse and support the policies and decisions of their rulers. Some religious interpretations legitimized these elitist practices. One Iraqi exile told me that a fellow Iraqi academic made frequent references to “we, the elite” in his conversations and discussions. When an Iraqi exile reminded a well-known dissident, who was also a cleric that Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shias, supported choosing leaders through some form of election, the man replied by claiming that that dictum was not intended for this age. He also believed that distinctions between the *nukhba* or elite and the commoners must be preserved. One prominent dissident told me that his group was very selective in accepting members – their total membership at the time numbered less than ten – because few people understood politics and that “our group is not a mass movement”. These dissidents and their groups openly subscribed to the belief that only intellectuals and other competent leaders were qualified to make decisions on the political future of Iraq and to prepare programs of action for their effective implementation. According to their political thinking, mass movements including mass insurrection such as the Shia insurrection were bound to fail because they lacked the competent leadership of intellectuals or elites.

Endless debates and disagreements

Refugees believed that perennial disagreements and rifts plaguing opposition groups was their major weakness. “The only thing they seemed to agree upon was the removal of the regime,” commented one annoyed refugee. Some refugees felt justified in describing relations between opposition groups as ‘mudhik mubki’ or a tragic comedy in which some opposition leaders squandered their energies

on attacking each other rather than on opposing and exposing the regime. The spectators of this tragic comedy were the refugees and the Iraqi dictator but while the former were crying the latter was laughing. Indeed, a long history of character assassination, poisonous propaganda and mudslinging made the prospects of cooperation among these groups unlikely. Refugees felt that only a miracle could convince opposition leaders to rise above their disagreements and prove themselves worthy of the weighty responsibility of marshaling dissidents inside and outside Iraq toward the objective of toppling the Iraqi regime.

Opposition groups disagreed on many issues such as the nature of the future system of government that would replace the incumbent regime, a solution for the Kurdish problem and strategies for bringing about the desired changes. Numerous conferences, meetings and discussion panels failed to produce a consensus on these issues. Consequently, refugees reacted to an announcement by the opposition of its intention to hold another conference with skepticism and sometimes ridicule. A refugee who was invited to the conference held in Washington, D.C. told me that after some consideration he decided to decline and he believed that the proceedings and outcome of the conference vindicated his decision.

Refugees were unhappy with opposition groups which allowed their rivalries and jealousies to draw attention away from the plight of Iraqis. The heated debates generated by the suppression of the 1991 insurrection widened the rift among opposition groups and soured relations among refugees. According to Shia opposition groups, the insurrection demonstrated the widespread popular support for their political objectives among the majority of the population. They applauded the rebels as heroes who dared to do the unthinkable by rising against the formidable forces of the oppressive regime and incurring heavy sacrifices. Rival opposition groups that advocated a secular political system in Iraq argued that the failure of the insurrection underlined the ineffectiveness of a religious or sectarian opposition in a religiously diverse country like Iraq. Others who advocated military intervention or a coup d'état as the only way to change the regime saw in this failure a confirmation of their view. Some went further than this by spreading stories slandering the rebellion and the rebels. They intentionally repeated allegations about wide-scale looting and highway robberies committed during the insurrection. A senior army officer who defected to the opposition during the insurrection angered

many refugees by claiming that his car was stolen by the rebels and referring to the rebellion as “the insurrection of robbers”. One of these offended refugees whose house was burnt down by government troops after the suppression of the insurrection retorted by accusing the opposition outside Iraq of doing nothing to help the rebellion.

Opposition groups also traded acrimonious accusations regarding their ultimate loyalties and sources of funds. Islamic groups were accused by rival groups of divided loyalties and of being under the influence or control of the Iranian government. These critics themselves did not deny accepting financial support from foreign governments. Refugees pointed out that the influx of American dollars, Saudi riyals and Kuwaiti dinars into the coffers of the opposition began after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when the United States and Arab Gulf countries became interested in the Iraqi opposition. The Gulf governments donated large sums of money to several opposition groups in the hope of destabilizing the Iraqi government. In 1991, many Iraqi opposition leaders traveled to Saudi Arabia at the invitation of its government in an effort to unite the opposition factions. Some Iraqi refugee made fun of these leaders who accomplished nothing during their stay at the Salah El-Din hotel in Riyadh except putting on few pounds. However, this support ended after it became clear that these groups had little if any influence over developments inside Iraq.

Some refugees became disenchanted with the opposition for its increased dependence on American financial aid. The involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency in the disbursement of this aid further discredited some opposition groups in the eyes of many refugees. Refugees who insisted on the autonomy of the opposition rejected the idea that foreign aid and support were indispensable for the achievement of the opposition’s objectives. These refugees pointed out that the interests of these governments did not always coincide with those of the Iraqi opposition and that in one instance at least close cooperation with a foreign government may have led to the leak of secret information. Few years ago, an opposition leader revealed that he gave details of a planned attempt to overthrow the regime including the names of high-ranking military officers and prominent civilians involved in it to the United States government and subsequently they were apprehended by the Iraqi authorities and executed. A number of refugees discussing this report were divided on whether or not the Iraqi government was alerted by the Americans but they all agreed that it

was naive to entrust a foreign government with the opposition's secrets.

Many refugees are also unhappy with the opposition's handling of many issues such as the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq. They argued that these sanctions mainly hurt the Iraqi people and undermined their ability to oppose the regime. Instead of weakening the Ba'th regime, these sanctions were cunningly used by it to deflect public anger away from it. There is, however, disagreement among the opposition on whether all or some sanctions should be removed. Some groups advocated lifting all sanctions while others argued that restrictions on Iraq's rearmament should be retained.

Smear campaigns, character assassinations and violence

According to some refugees, rivalries and disagreements between opposition groups often deteriorated to personal attacks, smear campaigns, character assassination and sometimes violence. These are highly potent weapons in Arab societies where a good reputation is highly valued, painstakingly sustained and jealously guarded. Projecting a shining image is important to all Arabs and especially political leaders. Laws enacted by the Ba'th regime imposed a mandatory life sentence for private criticism of the President Saddam Hussain and a death sentence for public criticism. The late Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser greatly intimidated other Arab leaders opposed to him with verbal attacks on them in his highly popular speeches. It is widely assumed that some unscrupulous Arab journalists extorted large sums of money from Arab leaders in return for discontinuing public criticism of them and their policies. The publication and distribution of leaflets criticizing the policies and conduct of some Iraqi dissidents operating in Syria aroused the apprehension of many dissident leaders. Although the motive behind this smear campaign was alleged to be pecuniary, some dissidents have also used similar methods to discredit each other.

Dissidents sometimes questioned the integrity of rivals and accused them of improper and unethical conduct. When a senior member in the Iraqi government defected to the opposition, some welcomed this as a positive sign but others regarded him as a potential competitor as the following statement illustrates:

Do they expect me to trust someone who used to be a high-ranking member in the ruling Ba'th party, a person who served the regime faithfully for many years. His hands are stained with the blood of innocent Iraqis. How do I know that he is sincere?

The leaders of some religious groups were often taunted by secular dissidents with allegations of being of non-Iraqi origin and thus cannot claim to represent the Iraqi people or speak on their behalf. According to one disapproving refugee, rival groups within the Iraqi opposition sometimes went to any unscrupulous or even libelous length to discredit each other. He had the following anecdote to illustrate this:

I lived and worked in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s. Only few knew of my opposition to the Iraqi regime and its unjust war against Iran. It would have been unwise to go public on that because all world governments, excluding Syria, were on the side of Iraq. One day I received a letter, which carried no return address. The anonymous author of the letter wrote that he wanted to inform all Iraqis abroad of the scandalous behavior of leaders of a major religious opposition group. The letter alleged that some of these leaders violated Islamic principles by drinking alcohol and behaving in ways contrary to Islamic teachings. Why would anyone go to all this trouble of sending a letter like this and to me of all people? At first, I thought that agents of the Iraqi government were behind it but after living in Syria for few years and observing how factions of the opposition feuded with each other I was ready to believe that the letter could very well be the work of a rival group. One day I even heard a similar story about a leading member of a religious group who 'was seen in a nightclub drinking alcohol.' Of course, the source of the story was anonymous and they did not have a picture to prove it.

Regardless of their authenticity, these allegations have spoiled relations among dissident groups and undermined their credibility among refugees. "I heard that in one meeting they were discussing the composition of the cabinet after the removal of the Ba'th regime and that one of them has already been nominated for the position of minister of the media," a member of a rival group reported. Critics of the royalists had this to say about a new recruit: "You know why he became a royalist? Because he is paid handsomely for his loyalty". And

when one prominent refugee began making regular visits to the Kurdish enclave where several opposition groups set up offices, a rival dissident made the following comment: "He travels to the north and meets with opposition leaders there not to take part in the opposition activities but to show his face and get paid." Also, after the Iraqi forces succeeded in reestablishing their control over a large area of Iraqi Kurdistan and capturing or forcing armed opposition members to retreat, opposition groups traded accusations of betrayal and collusion with the Iraqi regime. One refugee who has been closely monitoring the situation said that they were close to marching down on Baghdad and that someone must have tipped the regime about their plan.

Given this state of relations among opposition groups, it was not surprising to find tolerance for differences in opinion among them to be low or even nonexistent. One refugee told me the following story to illustrate this: "I heard that a prominent member of the opposition who criticized the American aerial bombardment of Iraq was abducted, stripped of his clothes, and then left naked on the side of a country road."

Differences in opinion were not tolerated even within the same group. Internal disagreements often led to the alienation of some members and sometimes the breaking up of the group into competing factions. One refugee described the fractured state of opposition groups as follows: "Yesterday we had one Wifak group, and today we have two Wifak groups". The same could be noted about other opposition groups such as the Dawa Party and the Communists. A split within an opposition group was usually followed by exchanges of bitter accusations between the factions. A member of one faction accused his former leader of having suspicious commercial and business connections with foreign governments allied to the Iraqi regime, misusing of funds provided by Arab governments and of being a drug addict. The deposed leader of another opposition group condemned some of his former comrades for misrepresenting his opinions and fabricating stories about him which forced him to abdicate his position and seek asylum in another country.

Differences in opinion sometimes escalated into violence. This happened between supporters of Islamic groups and members of a small Communist faction during a demonstration in Toronto. The intermittent war between the Kurdish groups which resulted in heavy loss of life and wide-scale destruction led one refugee to make the following comment: "We could have proven to the world that we are

politically mature and capable of establishing a democratic government. Instead, we killed each other, encouraged the regime's forces to reoccupy the area and gave those who argued that our country can only be ruled by a despotic government all the ammunition they need".

Many refugees were deeply disappointed by this state of affairs within the opposition. They are saddened by rivalries and disagreements within the opposition and angered by their repeated failure to establish a united front. By the end of the 1990s, their support for most opposition groups reached a low ebb.

"They are against us"

Iraqi refugees were keenly interested in international political events and developments that directly or indirectly impacted the situation inside Iraq. They also recognized that several Western and regional powers as well as Arab countries bordering Iraq were concerned with political developments inside Iraq and exercised various degrees of influence on them. Their analyses and evaluation of the policies of these governments toward the Ba'th regime and the Iraqi opposition led them to form certain views on these governments. Religious, sectarian, ethnic and political affiliations of refugees also influenced these evaluations. Invariably, these governments were classified into two types: friendly governments that oppose the Iraqi regime and unfriendly governments because of their support for the regime. Before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, refugees approved of only the Iranian and Syrian governments which were hospitable toward them and supported or sympathized with their causes. While many refugees continued to view Iran as their main, if not only, ally in their struggle against the Iraqi regime and its regional and international supporters, some of them were critical of its treatment of refugees inside Iran and its attempts to patch up relations with the Ba'th regime. Similarly, Iraqi refugees in Syria viewed with deep apprehension rapprochement between the two governments.

Arab governments or political groups that sided with the Iraqi government against Iran or maintained normal relations with it after its invasion of Kuwait were strongly denounced by refugees. For example, refugees expressed sadness and anger at the Palestinians and their leaders for supporting the Iraqi regime and believing its bellicose

threats against Israel and its allies. Shia refugees were convinced that many Arabs and Muslims were motivated by sectarian loyalties to support the Iraqi regime. One of these refugees was dumbfounded by the following reasoning and predictions expressed by a wealthy Arab at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait:

I am amazed at the Iraqi opposition for standing against the Iraqi government. Do you know whom you are supporting in fact? The Gulf Arab rulers! These people are only interested in serving their own interests and carnal pleasures. We have not seen the end of this. After the overthrow of all the Gulf regimes, the Iraqi army will move northward to occupy Turkey and from there advance on Europe.

Many Iraqi refugees also distrusted the policies of the Gulf countries toward Iraq and questioned the sincerity of their declared policy of opposing the Iraqi regime. According to them, the Gulf governments opposed a genuine political change in Iraq because it would probably bring the Shia into government. Refugees maintained that given the strong anti-Shia sentiments and prejudices in the Gulf, these governments would accept a new government in Baghdad only if it excluded them. They also suspected Gulf governments of using their influence with the United States and other Western countries to sustain the Iraqi regime in power until an acceptable replacement could be found. Furthermore, the Gulf governments were accused of complicity in prolonging the sufferings of the Iraqi people by supporting the economic sanctions. After learning of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a refugee said that the Kuwaitis brought it upon themselves and that he felt no sympathy toward them. He added:

They gave him billions of dollars, allowed him to use their ports, fought on his side and whenever the Iraqi regime boasted of another real or imaginary victory in their war against Iran, the Kuwaitis slaughtered hundreds of sheep in celebration. Some of them named their sons Saddam. The invasion of Kuwait was Allah's punishment on the Kuwaitis.

Many refugees opposed Western governments and regarded their activities in the area with deep suspicion. They criticized the American government and its allies for failing to deliver on their promise to help the Iraqi people in overthrowing the regime. Refugees also subscribed to the assumption that the American government was capable of

effecting political change in Iraq but chose not to do so because it did not serve its national interests then. They contended that if the Americans really wanted to see the regime overthrown, they would not have permitted its army to use military helicopters and tanks in suppressing the 1991 insurrection. Some refugees even believed that the American government was and remains a covert ally of the Iraqi regime. "[The Americans] need the Iraqi government," one refugee argued, "as a buffer between Iran on one hand and Israel and Arab allies of the United States on the other and they may also use the Iraqis against the Iranians in the future." Even before the allied forces halted their advance inside Iraq, one refugee insisted that they would not go as far north as Baghdad to overthrow the regime. When he was asked to justify this prediction, he said that the Gulf governments were against it.

Many refugees were convinced that the American policy toward Iraq aimed at destroying their country's capabilities as a potential regional power which could threaten its interests in the area. One means of achieving this was by sustaining the ruling oppressive regime or replacing it with a weak puppet regime. Advocates of this view also pointed out that much of the economic infrastructure of Iraq including bridges, roads and buildings were intentionally targeted by allied forces in their aerial bombardment. According to them, the economic sanctions were also intended to impoverish the Iraqis, interrupt the process of development in their country and depopulate it by inducing high mortality rates as a result of malnutrition and inadequate medical services and by encouraging unprecedented emigration of its educated manpower. Some refugees also believed that one of the objectives of this American campaign implemented with the connivance of the Iraqi regime was to resettle Palestinian refugees in place of displaced Iraqi Shias as part of a secret Arab-Israeli peace deal sponsored by the Americans. The attitudes of Iraqi refugees toward the United States was best represented by a scene involving one of them attending a meeting between Americans of Arab origin and a representative of a candidate in the latest American election. The man in traditional southern Iraqi attire was filmed by the cameras of an Arab satellite channel rising from his seat in a state of high agitation, flailing his arms in the air and taking several threatening steps toward the speaker before he was restrained.

Conclusions

The purpose behind collecting stories about Iraqi refugees and presenting them in this small volume was to provide a dynamic view of the aspirations and struggle of Iraqi refugees and exiles. In this concluding chapter, an attempt will be made to collate these different life experiences and points of view into a general picture of Iraqi refugees.

Iraqis identified three major catastrophes in their history: Noah's flood, the invasion of the Mongols and the Ba'th regime. The unprecedented mass departure of Iraqis from their country occurred after this regime came to power and as a result of its oppressive and adventurous policies. These refugees were either expelled by the regime because of their sectarian affiliation or alleged non-Arab ethnic origin or driven into exile by its discriminatory and repressive policies or forced by deteriorating economic conditions to seek a better life elsewhere. The scale of this exodus was massive and spanned all ethnic, social, religious and sectarian groups in the diverse Iraqi society. First the Muslim Shia were banished followed by the Kurds escaping the fighting between the Iraqi forces and the Peshmergas or Kurdish rebels. The defeat of the insurrections in the south and north after the second Gulf resulted in a massive wave of refugees from both groups. Finally, it was the turn of Sunni Arabs to join the ranks of refugees and exiles driven out by economic sanctions, US occupation and terrorism.

These refugees and exiles followed a number of routes in their search for asylum. Many hundreds of thousands of them made a long or short stop in a refugee camp in one of the countries bordering Iraq. Refugees housed in camps in Iran and Syria were allowed later to reside in these countries while those in Turkey and Saudi Arabia either returned to their home country or obtained asylum in Western countries. Many of the Iraqis living in Syria, Turkey and Iran lost patience with the unhurried legal asylum process and decided to try unlawful ways. By the turn of the century, many Iraqi refugees have been given asylum and the exodus continued after the US occupation and downfall of the Ba'th regime in 2003.

Many refugees endured hardships and sometimes risked losing their lives in their attempts to find safe havens. Questions about the times spent in refugee camps often brought to their minds painful memories featuring high fences topped with barbed wires, sultry and sometimes abusive guards and feelings of frustration, anguish, and despair. Those who chose the illegal way to obtain an asylum knew of the dangers involved in dealing with smugglers and risked being thrown overboard from smugglers' ships or drowned on the high seas and yet they were willing to wager all their money and hopes on it.

An asylum in a Western country was regarded by many of them as an end to all their worries. They were confident that the generous welfare systems and abundant opportunities for gainful employment in Western countries will solve all their immediate financial problems and guarantee their future prosperity. A passport or even a travel document from one of these countries represented for them a sense of freedom and protection from arbitrary authority never experienced by them before. After obtaining asylum, many discovered that their expectations were unrealistically high and that even in these countries ambition and motivation were not enough to achieve all their aspirations. Indeed, disappointment and disillusion were the two words that characterized the work experience of many of these refugees. Graduates among them were dismayed to find out that employers did not recognize their degrees and experiences while non-graduates were at a disadvantage due to their lack of language and work skills in demand. Also, few of them had the necessary capital and entrepreneurial talents to start their own businesses. Sooner or later, most of them abandoned the dream of prosperity or even financial security for the reality of a subsistence income from the welfare system or a non-skilled work for minimum wages and the humiliation and bitterness associated with it.

Living within a different culture presented most of these refugees with the most formidable and often agonizing challenges. In view of the major differences between their traditional and some host cultures, they were convinced that preserving their cultural identity and practicing their cherished values and customs cannot be achieved without insulating themselves from external influences. Many of them and especially married refugees with children admitted that this was practically impossible. Consequently, they felt that they had to work hard to safeguard their cultural integrity and that of their dependents against the undesirable impact of Western cultural messages in

television programs, books, magazines and at schools. The task was strenuous but no one dared to neglect it because failure may result in some of his or her horrible nightmares coming to life. Since most of them claimed to have left their country to protect their religious or ethnic identities, they considered sacrificing this for the sake of the material benefits of an asylum in the West to be the ultimate defeat.

Most of those whose stories are told here befriended only other Iraqi refugees or exiles. Refugees living in Western countries ascribed this to deep cultural and religious differences and the language barrier. But even those living in countries bordering Iraq whose cultures were similar or close to their own found subtle subcultural differences that impeded friendship and close social interactions with nationals of these countries. Consequently, intermarriages were uncommon and refugees preferred to marry from within their traditional cultural and religious group.

Their fear of losing their traditional values and cultural identity was strong and impelled refugees and exiles to seek support and comfort within their religious groups. Membership in these religious groups was emphasized through conformity to the Islamic code of dress and other external and verbal distinguishing characteristics. They visited mosques and husaynias regularly not only to perform their religious duties but also to meet with fellow refugees, to make friends and obtain information, advice and help. The spiritual nourishment and emotional and psychological succor derived from this membership were just important for them as the material and social benefits.

Politics was also important for Iraqi refugees. It made refugees out of them and they had aspirations and objectives which could only be achieved through the political process. They showed their interest in this field mainly through discussion of political events and developments in their homeland. After the initial high enthusiasm in the 1980s and 1990s, their support for the organized Iraqi opposition and their participation in its activities declined. They generally distrusted politicians, and the unabated war of accusations between some of these groups reinforced this distrust. Also, refugees were dissatisfied with the record of the opposition especially its failure to create a united front with clear objectives and strategies, and its inability to win support for its causes and to represent the aspirations and needs of the refugees. They also suspected Arab and Western governments of pursuing their own national interests regardless and sometimes at the

expense of the interests of the Iraqi people. Many of them believed that only divine intervention can remove the Ba'th regime from power.

Their refugee status and their struggle to build a new life for them under unfavorable conditions casted their thick shadows on the psyche of Iraqi refugees. As a result, their mood in general appeared to oscillate between long periods of melancholy and hopelessness and brief intervals of optimism and cheerfulness. This sadness was sometimes overwhelming as the reference of one refugee to his need to shed some of the copious tears inside him. Obviously, some of the refugees were not receiving enough social support from family members and friends to overcome the disruptive effects of these mood cycles on their emotional stability and psychological health. The stories of Omran, the convert and those who committed suicide illustrated the seriousness of this situation. Many similar stories and incidents were not included in this volume for lack of sufficient detailed information from eyewitnesses and there were probably many more which did not come to my attention.

Iraqi refugees were in need of organized help and support. This applied equally to refugees who have lived for several years in their host countries and have been granted citizenship. Most of them needed help to improve their language proficiency, to learn new skills and to solve the problems resulting from having to live and adapt to different cultures. Although they are benefiting from the services provided by Western governments for all immigrants, better results can be achieved if special programs catering to the specific needs of these refugees were designed and implemented. In the field of social services and counseling for example, relatives, friends and religious leaders provide valuable help to refugees with serious social problems whose privacy value deterred them from seeking the professional advice of family counselors and social workers. Recruiting and training refugees to provide such services on a professional and regular basis may be a better alternative that needed to be explored by host governments. This higher degree of involvement and participation of refugees is indeed a prerequisite for the success of many service programs directed to them. Better services will not only make life easier for these refugees but also help them in raising a more adjusted second generation of citizens and permanent residents in these countries.

This book was based on data conveniently collected from a limited number of cooperative refugees. Further studies based on more

rigorous methods and using larger samples is needed to achieve a better understanding of problems experienced by Iraqi refugees and to help in solving them.